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THE GIRL FROM EASY STREET

Richard Foster

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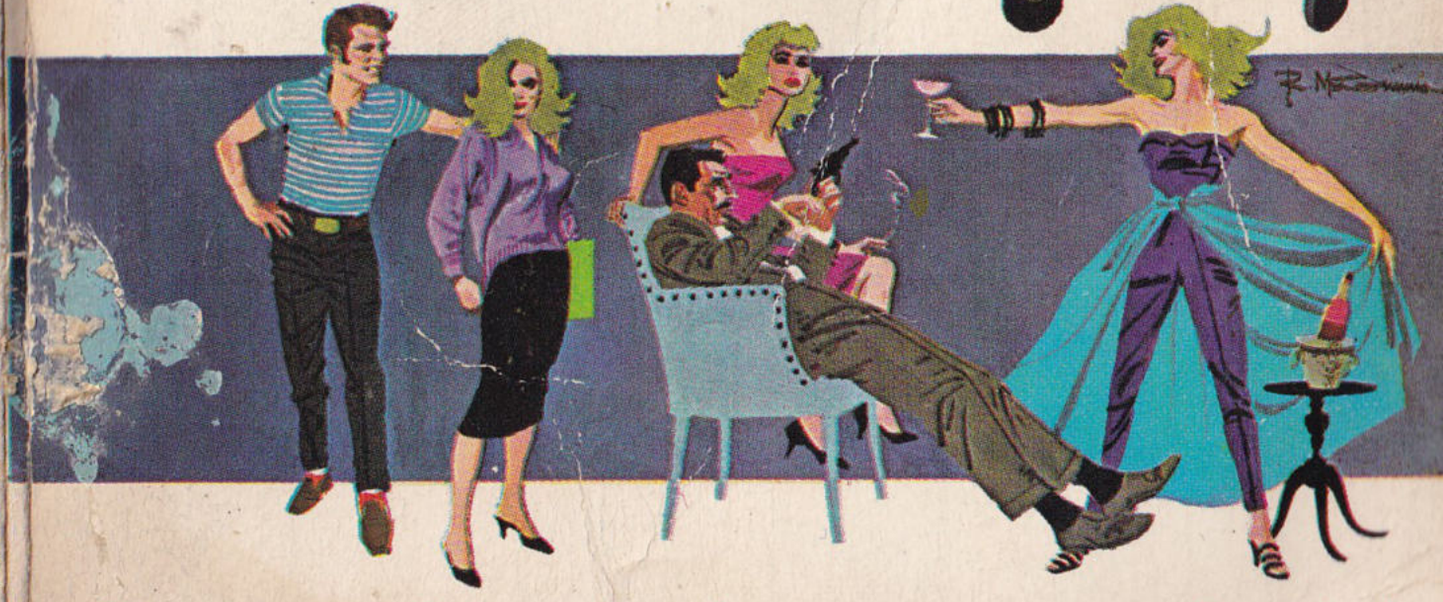

She wanted too much too soon—and got it

A child's face . . .
A girl's body . . .
A woman's desires . . .

She stood in front of the mirror combing her long blond hair. She looked older than sixteen, she decided with satisfaction.

The red sweater was stretched taut against her breasts. It was like meeting a total stranger, and she liked this new self.

Now she was going to try it out and see what it could do.

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THE GIRL FROM EASY STREET

Richard Foster

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FOR Nancy Dudar—
for assistance beyond the call of duty

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CHAPTER 1

She stood in front of the mirror, combing her blonde hair until it looked like spun wheat. Then she ran her fingers through it. She tugged at her sweater and stepped back so that even the tops of her rolled socks were reflected in the mirror.

She looked older than sixteen. Maybe eighteen or nineteen, she thought with satisfaction. The red sweater pulled tightly against her full, young breasts. She twisted sideways, with her arms up, and the profile was enough like Marilyn Monroe's to reassure her. The skirt stretched tautly across her hard, flat belly and over the tense oval of her hips.

The pressure of water hummed through the pipes of the house. Her father was taking a shower in the bathroom downstairs. After a bit the water stopped and a moment later the walls carried the tuneless singing up to her room. It was Saturday night and her father was getting ready for the weekly party. It was the only time he sang.

Betty Jane leaned closer to the mirror and inspected the smear of lipstick across her generous mouth. She lifted her gaze and practiced looking seductive.

Downstairs, the bathroom door opened and there was the pad of bare feet across the floor. The steps went toward the front of the house and Betty Jane's body unconsciously stiffened against the impact of voices.

"Hurry up," Bob Allen yelled to his wife. "They'll soon be here."

There was no answer except the rattle of the dishes from the kitchen.

The mirror reflected the demureness of Betty Jane's blue eyes.

A dresser drawer banged shut in the bedroom below. There was a moment's silence while Bob Allen put on a

shirt. A closet door slammed. That meant he was putting on his pants.

"Damned tie," he muttered. Bare feet slapped against linoleum as he entered the kitchen. "Didn't you hear me?"

A plate clattered as Cynthia Allen shoved it into the cupboard. "I heard you," she said.

"So get a move on."

"Why the hell should I?"

Betty Jane leaned nearer to the mirror and used a tissue to remove a smear of lipstick from her teeth. The voices of her parents floated upstairs, continuing to invade her room.

"What's eating you?" Bob Allen demanded. "It's Saturday night. They'll be here any minute."

Another plate slammed into the cupboard. "A big deal," Cynthia sneered. "What does it mean to me except a bunch of drunks sprawling around the room, dropping ashes on the floor and burning holes in the rug?"

"What's the matter with you?" the man's voice sounded surprised. "The curse?"

Betty Jane made a face in the mirror. It was almost a duplicate of the one her mother was making downstairs.

"The only curse I've got," her mother retorted, "is the one I married seventeen years ago."

"You didn't register any complaints then," Bob Allen said defensively. "What's getting into you, Cyn? They're your friends as much as mine. Snap out of it, old girl; we're entitled to a little fun once a week."

There was a soft smacking sound and Betty Jane knew her father had playfully slapped her mother across the hips. He always expected it to be the magic gesture that would put his wife in good humor and was always surprised when it didn't.

"Keep your hands to yourself," she snapped. "Or save them for Ginny Dillon."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he demanded. His words were heavy with anger.

"You know," Cynthia Allen said. Betty Jane recognized the change in her voice. It always made her feel better when she succeeded in making her husband angry. "You think everybody's so blind that we don't know what you and Ginny do every time you go in the kitchen to mix drinks?"

"You're crazy," he shouted. "What kind of a way is that to talk about Ginny Dillon? She's your best friend."

"If she is, it doesn't keep her from making passes at you every time she comes here."

"Shut up!"

"Maybe," Cynthia said, "you keep it up long enough and I'll do something about it. With Teddy."

"You and Teddy?" he asked. His laughter, rolling up the stairs, was like a physical assault. "Oh, hell. You and Teddy!"

"What's so funny?" she demanded furiously. Their emotions swung in an eternal seesaw; anger or good humor in one produced the opposite in the other. "Maybe you think I'm so unattractive no man would look at me?"

"I'll tell you," he shouted. "You've been sitting on a cake of ice all your life. You're so cold every time I get near you I freeze. That's what's so funny. You and Teddy!"

"Don't be vulgar."

Betty Jane paused to listen, but there was nothing new being said. Oh, why did they have to fight like this all the time? She cupped her hands beneath her breasts, staring hypnotically into the mirror, and hummed a few bars of "Crazy, Man, Crazy."

"Vulgar," her father snorted. His voice was thick again, but with something other than anger. "I'll tell you another reason why it's funny. Teddy Dillon's got his own business, hasn't he? And he's got a big private office with a couch in it. You think it's just to rest his tired fanny?"

"I'm going to get dressed." Her mother's voice was cold and withdrawn.

"No," he shouted. "I'm going to tell you why it's funny. He meets young girls, Teddy does. Maybe eighteen, nineteen years old. *Young* girls. He tells them how he's always giving dresses away when he likes somebody and then he mentions a number he's got that's just made for them. The next thing you know they're dropping by his place to earn one of those free dresses. Right there on that couch. Young girls. You think he wants a hunk of ice like you?"

Betty Jane thought about Mr. Dillon. He was older than her father, a big, heavy-set, red-faced man. She tried to imagine his huge hands on a young girl—and it seemed

funny and impossible. She gave a last quick look at herself and went down the stairs.

"Some day you'll push me too far," Cynthia said angrily, "and I'll show you."

Betty Jane could see them facing each other in the kitchen. Their faces were tight with emotion. Her father was dressed except for his shoes and socks. She noticed the ugly tufts of hair bristling from his knobby feet.

"You'd freeze any man," Bob Allen jeered.

Cynthia lifted her eyes and saw her daughter on the stairs. She forced the tightness out of her face. "Shhh," she said. "It's Betty Jane." She clung to the belief that no one could overhear anything farther away than the next room. She was smiling falsely when her daughter reached the bottom of the stairs. "Oh, hello, darling. Going out now?"

Betty Jane's gaze swept over her parents' bodies and came to rest on the masks they had turned to her. "Yeah," she said.

"Where to, darling?" her mother asked lightly.

"To the malt shop. I told Steve I'd meet him there."

"Steve?" her father exclaimed. His gaze had been on her sweater, but now it lifted. The birth of some baffling emotion was mirrored in his eyes. "Steve who?"

"Harper, dear," Cynthia said. "Ray and Mollie Harper's son. He's a nice boy." It was her highest praise.

"I guess so," Bob Allen said reluctantly. His gaze slid back to his daughter's sweater.

"Don't stay out too late, dear," Cynthia called as Betty Jane turned away. "And be a good girl."

Betty Jane didn't answer. She went on through the door, hearing her father say, in what he thought was a low voice, "What do you mean letting her go around dressed like that? It's not decent the way her—the way that sweater clings to her. Shows everything she's got."

"I don't hear you complaining about the way Ginny Dillon shows what she has——" her mother began.

Betty Jane slammed the front door and ran down the steps. She walked rapidly down Sycamore Lane. Her face didn't lose its set expression until she heard a shrill wolf whistle from a passing car. Then a smile tugged at her mouth and her hips unconsciously tightened beneath her close-fitting skirt.

She turned right onto Barnum Boulevard. It was the only main street running through Lotus Park. In eight blocks it encompassed the entire business life of the village: four grocery stores, three delicatessens, two barbershops, one drugstore, one shoe shop, two small dress shops, ten real estate dealers, a branch of a Long Beach bank which was open only in the summer, and three candy stores. One of the candy stores had a juke box and so was the unofficial headquarters for the teen-agers. There was nowhere else they could go; at least, nowhere that would get parental and legal blessing.

Betty Jane's walk became slower as she turned down Barnum Boulevard. Her hips swung more provocatively, the technique a mixture of instinct and imitation.

From somewhere behind her she heard the deep-throated roar of a jazzed-up motor. It died down to a soft chuckle as it drew nearer. She gave her head a little toss and kept on walking, resisting the impulse to look around. This was all part of her technique of provocation.

The hot rod edged over to the curb and crept along beside her.

"Hi, baby," a young masculine voice said.

Now she turned her head to look. The car was an old Ford roadster, but the boy had done things to it Ford never dreamed about. She knew the boy. Not well, for he was older than her crowd, but she'd seen him at two or three parties. And she'd heard about him from the other girls. His name was Johnny Raymond. He was all of nineteen or twenty. She knew that he worked in a garage somewhere and that he'd rebuilt the car himself. Secretly she thought him handsome and she felt a sense of triumph that he had finally noticed her. He was tall and well-built. He wore his black hair long, combed in the back so that it curled. A duck's-ass haircut, it was called.

"Hi," she said casually, but kept on walking.

"Where you going?" he asked.

"Jemmy's." That was the malt shop.

"Sweets to the sweet," he said. "Want to ride?"

She hesitated long enough to imply indifference. "I don't care," she said.

He threw open the door. "Hop in."

"Okay." She got in and shut the door. She smoothed

her skirt down over her knees. The car leaped forward with a surge of power. The exhaust roared and crackled behind them.

The boy patted the steering wheel with one hand. "Some jalopy, huh?"

"It's okay," she said diffidently.

"Okay!" he said mockingly. "You know what this baby's got? She's got a Merc engine with E and S heads, Evans-three carburetor manifold and a Winfield R-one cam."

"Big operation," she said.

The boy grinned. "Sure, I'm a big-time operator. Didn't you know? Want to see how fast she'll go?"

"Here?"

"You think I want to comb cops out of my hair? Out to Fruit Beach."

"I'm supposed to be somewhere," she said vaguely. She hoped he wouldn't drop it. A small knot of excitement had gathered in her stomach.

"Chicken?" he asked.

"Are you kidding?" she retorted indignantly.

He grinned again. "Where're you supposed to go?"

"I told you. Jemmy's."

"What do you want to go there for? Sit around with a bunch of kids and geeks?" He slipped in the clutch and gunned the motor. "We ought to make a great team. I've got the motor and you've got the body."

At a loss for words, she fell back on an old stand-by. "Oh, that's *too* much."

"Tell you what," he said. "I'll show you what she can do and then we'll go down on the beach and knock off a few cans of beer. What do you say?"

She hesitated, getting a sense of power from the knowledge that he was waiting for her answer. She knew what it would be, but there was pleasure in holding it back. She went to the malt shop only when there was nothing better to do. But it meant listening to the same old platters, the same tiresome cracks from the boys, the same shrill giggling from the other girls.

She looked at Johnny Raymond and saw the eager expectancy on his face. She shifted in the seat, conscious of the tautness of the sweater across her breasts.

"Okay," she said.

"Great." He pulled over to the curb, checked the street, then swung around in a U-turn. He gunned the motor as they headed back in the direction from which they had come. He drove fast, staying just under the speed limit. He didn't speak until they had turned in on Long Beach Road. He cut his speed again as they hit the edge of Island Park and glanced at her.

"You're Betty Jane Allen," he said.

She nodded.

"You know who I am?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"What else do you know about me?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she asked.

He glanced at her again. "You're a slick chick. How come I never noticed you before?"

"You were too busy," she said. "You and that Peggy Danticelli."

"That pig," he said scornfully. "She's a real Zelda."

"That how you're going to talk about me?"

"Not you, baby," he said. "You're cool."

She gave him what she thought was a worldly glance, but didn't answer.

They drove through Island Park, over the bridge and into Long Beach. He turned left on Park Avenue. When the avenue became Lido Road, he gunned the motor and the car leaped forward. Betty Jane's blonde hair streamed back in the wind.

Reaching Point Lookout, he swung into a street which stretched ahead like an endless ribbon. There were no other cars in sight and he began to pick up speed.

Ahead of them another car turned into the street. Its lines identified it as also a hot rod.

Johnny Raymond stepped on the accelerator and they quickly drew up beside the other car. He leaned over to shout across Betty Jane, "Want to drag?"

The other boy nodded and the two motors began to roar, soon climbing to a crescendo.

Betty Jane sat tensely in the hard seat. She could feel the surging power of the car vibrating through her body; the wind tore at her hair and clothes and her heart pounded with excitement. She watched the speedometer needle creep up past eighty and begin crowding ninety. The knotted muscles in her stomach grew tighter.

Suddenly from far behind them came the thin scream of a siren.

The two hot rods stayed nose to nose for another minute, then the rival one dropped behind.

"He chickened out," Johnny exulted. He was leaning over the steering wheel, his face tense and alive.

He lifted his foot and rode the brake with a careful touch. He swung the wheel to the left. The tires screeched so loudly they drowned out the distant keening of the police car. The body of the hot rod tilted, the metal groaning in protest, but it still hugged the ground as they darted into a side street. Johnny still rode the brake and the car had dropped to fifty by the time they hit the next corner.

They swung sharply around three or four more turns until Betty Jane wasn't sure in which direction they were going. Finally Johnny straightened the hot rod out on a narrow street and held the speed at a steady thirty-five. She could see him straining to listen. There was no siren to be heard.

"Cops," Johnny said with a twisted smile. "I can always give them a slip."

Betty Jane said nothing. She leaned back against the seat and let her trembling muscles relax. It was the first time she'd ever gone that fast and she'd liked it, but now she felt as though she were slightly drunk.

"Did you see how that cowboy chickened out?" he asked. "If he hadn't, I'd have taken him. Only ninety per and I've had her up to a hundred and ten." He looked down at her and laughed, letting the tension trickle out through his voice. "Like it, baby?"

"Crazy, man," she said. Her voice was still tight, but she was glad to find it didn't shake.

He laughed again, throwing back his head and letting the sound roll out of his throat. He reached over and patted her on the knee. "You're solid, baby," he said.

He stopped at a delicatessen just before they reached the beach and bought a dozen cold cans of beer. Then he drove onto the parking lot.

They walked out on the beach hand in hand. The floodlights were on and showed several people swimming. Two girls threw a beach ball back and forth, inspecting the newly arrived male out of the corners of their eyes.

By unspoken agreement, Johnny and Betty Jane turned up the beach away from the lights. The sand flew up in little spurts from their shoes.

They left the last dim circle of light and ventured into the darkness beyond. That others had had the same idea was evidenced by the glowing ends of cigarettes here and there, the occasional muted voices blending with the rhythmic lapping of the water against the sand.

Finding a spot far enough removed from the others, they sat down. He opened two cans of beer and handed one to her. The can was wetly cold against the palm of her hand. She tilted it and the cold beer washed down her throat with a faint stinging sensation.

Far down the beach, the cones of light seemed solid. Voices carried clearly but the words were jumbled. Off in the night somewhere a bird complained hoarsely.

They drank their beer straight, without words to cut it. Betty Jane could feel the excitement returning, building up its explosive knot in her stomach. After the first can, she lost interest in the beer although she continued to drink mechanically. What would follow was almost a predetermined ritual. She waited for it and anticipation pulled at the tendons of her legs until her toes curled. She was eager for the rough fumbling of hands and the warmth that would ride over her. She knew that some day there would be more than that, but for the present that was enough since it brought the slow awakening of her body.

There was a splash as Johnny tossed his empty beer can into the ocean. He put his arm around her and kissed her. With her mouth still on his, her body moved to meet him. The beat of her own heart drowned out the smaller sound of the ocean.

She floated in her own warmth, yet knew that something was different than usual. His hands didn't fumble but were direct and sure of themselves. The meaning of this, however, didn't penetrate at first. Then she felt his body shifting beside her and suddenly he was forcing her down into the sand.

Panic flooded over her, drowning out her pleasure. She put her hands against his chest and pushed, twisting away from him. His hands clutched at her, pinching the flesh. Then, all at once, she was free and on her feet.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded, breathing heavily.

"Nothing," she said. Her own breath was tight in her throat. "Nothing."

The boy got angrily to his feet. "You got ice in your veins," he said.

Her body stiffened against the words, remembering her father's identical accusation of her mother. "Don't be vulgar," she said. "Take me home." Without waiting for an answer, she started walking down the beach. He followed, kicking the sand angrily with each step.

Neither of them spoke on the drive back to Lotus Park. The hot rod stopped a block away from her house. Betty Jane walked rapidly down the street as it made a screeching U-turn and roared away. She could see the lights still on in the house and a moment later she could hear the sounds of the party.

She slipped into the foyer, closing the door gently behind her. In the living room, to her right, three or four people were talking all at once, somebody was singing and the radio was playing loudly. She stepped quickly past the door and started up the stairs. Then she saw them.

Her father and Ginny Dillon, a willowy blonde, were standing in the doorway of the kitchen. They were kissing, their eyes closed, their bodies locked in a close embrace. Betty Jane watched them expressionlessly a moment, then went silently up the stairs.

She threw her clothes over a chair and went straight to bed. She automatically wrapped the smooth sheet around one hand and pressed it against her cheek. There was a moment of fantasy (She came out of the Stork Club, the mink draped carelessly over her shoulders, and hailed a taxi. The cab driver was Johnny Raymond) and then she went to sleep.

CHAPTER 2

Lotus Park is one of the dozens of unfinished villages which infest Nassau County, Long Island. It juts off the eastern side of Long Beach Road between Oceanside and Island Park. From the air, Long Beach Road seems to

mark the spot where something took a bite out of a crude triangle and what is left is Lotus Park. Its other boundaries are Mott Street on the edge of Oceanside, Barnum Island Creek just north of Island Park, and the Lotus Park Beach on Reynolds Channel. In the summer it has a population of fifteen hundred and in the winter one of seven hundred, but for practical purposes the mayor (whose salary is a dollar a year) claims there are two thousand residents.

Like other villages in Nassau, Lotus Park has cool summers generously spiked with mosquitoes and the aroma of a dirty channel, so many Republicans that it has to invent two new political parties to give the illusion of a contest at elections, and a small core of old residents who resent everyone not born there. A fourth of the population commutes to New York City, leaving behind a residue of discontented women, children and other dependents.

Ask anyone and he will tell you that the only thing worse than a small town is the small town lost in the shadow of a large city. Ask the Allen family of Lotus Park and the answer will be laced with a jigger of venom.

The Allens had moved to Lotus Park fifteen years before, when Betty Jane was one year old. This still did not qualify them for acceptance by the original Italian and Irish families, but then the Allens thought of them as foreigners and Shanty Irish, so the score was about even.

Their length of residence did afford the Allens a certain superior feeling about the wealthier newcomers to the village—in fact, Cynthia Allen often spoke of the women as "those nouveau bitches."

If this made for a three-part caste system, it was only a reflection of the larger Long Island picture. During the summer Long Beach was crowded with women escaping the heat of Manhattan only to swelter in silver fox and mink, the tangible displays of their husbands' affluence and affection. Their husbands rode the Long Island trains to Manhattan and back, playing gin rummy with their peers and ignoring anyone who was in a lower income bracket. It was said—mostly by the mink-stoled matrons on the boardwalk—that Island Park was the slum

of Long Beach and Lotus Park was the slum of Island Park.

Robert J. Allen also commuted to New York. Six days a week he drove his new Ford to Island Park and took the eight-ten. He was head salesman for Karen Frocks, a job which gave him double pleasure, for he enjoyed working there as much as he did insisting that he detested the whole garment industry. He liked the constant pressure, the fierce haggling with buyers and, especially, the sleek models. He would straighten an invisible wrinkle in a dress, call attention to the perfection of a seam, his fingers darting at the dress like a bee hovering over a flower. All the time he would be pleasantly aware of the warm flesh beneath the Karen number he was selling.

It was a good job. Two hundred dollars a week and a bonus at Christmas. Plus the warm flesh beneath a Karen dress. Then there was the expense account. For the benefit of the buyers, who had to be entertained with night clubs, expensive liquor and even more expensive girls whose phone numbers nestled in the address book he kept in the office. In between, his fingers tugged at unyielding seams. Or at Ginny Dillon.

Once, almost two years earlier, he and Ginny Dillon had gone further than their usual drunken fumbling. They had met in Manhattan and gone to a hotel together. It had been the middle of July and the affair was a brief, sweaty struggle that left both of them limp with dissatisfaction. They had never tried it again, but time had glossed over the incident until each of them felt it had been an authentic high in romance.

Five nights a week Bob Allen came home, his fecundity of good humor exhausted. He ate his dinner, listening to but not hearing the chatter of his wife and daughter, then retired to a comfortable spot in front of the television set.

Saturday was different. He got home by two o'clock and was soon out mowing the lawn and weeding the flower beds. He was proud of the house, a two-bedroom Cape Cod with finished attic. Although fifteen years old, it looked as good as or better than most of the houses in Lotus Park. He was sensitive to its every crack and groan; at the first warning he would rush to rejuvenate any sign of its aging.

When the lawn had been groomed and the house

checked for new signs of senility, he went into the house for a nap. Saturday night was party night: Joe and Florence Bernstein, Ed and Anna Spiegel, Ben and Sylvia Aarons, Teddy and Ginny Dillon and the Allens. Some weeks there would be two or three other couples, but those five had been getting together every Saturday night for more than two years.

The men were all in the same business. Two of the men owned their businesses, the other two were salesmen like Bob Allen. The Bernsteins and Spiegels lived in Long Beach, the Aarons in Island Park and the Dillons in Oceanside. They shared no other experiences except the habit of getting drunk together once a week.

The parties always started the same way. The women huddled at one end of the living room, rehashing old canasta scores and trading gossip. The men, at the other end, griping about business. Somebody—usually Teddy Dillon—always made the well-worn joke about two Gentiles like Allen and Dillon being smuggled into the dress business. With the preliminaries over, they got down to serious drinking. By the fourth drink the two groups had come together. By the eighth, the pattern of the evening was set. Florence Bernstein would spend the rest of the night dancing and no one would watch. Ben Aarons and Teddy Dillon would run through their repertoire of dirty jokes. Ed Spiegel would turn on the radio and sing with the vocalists. Bob Allen and Ginny Dillon would suddenly become interested in serving everyone their drinks, pausing in the foyer to clutch avidly at each other.

Sunday mornings, in the Allen home, were a time of tribulation.

There were small children in the neighborhood to whom Sunday morning was a time for joy. Small boys, mounted on imaginary pintos, charged across the lawn or prepared to launch the first spaceship to Mars. Little girls played hopscotch, shouting deprecations at invading boys and dogs. This special feeling about Sunday morning was shared by Peter Beruccio who lived in the next house. Promptly at seven-thirty every Sunday morning he began mowing his lawn; neither kind words nor harsh had made the slightest dent in his schedule for fifteen years. The lawn mower was old, as was Mr. Beruccio,

and the grooming of the grass was accomplished with much clank and clangor.

With each fresh assault of sound, on this particular morning, Bob Allen twisted in his tangled bed and tried to grind his pulsing head deeper into the pillow. In the other twin bed, Cynthia Allen fought the same losing battle for sleep.

In her own room, Betty Jane slept through the tumult—slept and dreamed an old dream.

She was walking down a stairway. The steps were high and the banister to which she clung was shaky. With each step the boards creaked and the whole stair seemed to sway. She could feel the fear creeping up through her legs to take possession of her body. She gripped the banister even tighter. Knowing that she must not fall. Knowing that she would. She tried to turn back up the stairway but couldn't—fought against the reality of the dream but sleep clutched her too tightly. . . . Then she fell. There was a wild moment of feeling her body tilt, of stepping where there was no step, then she was rolling over and over down the endless stairs.

She was almost to the bottom when she saw them. Her mother and father. They were arguing, their lips moving soundlessly and their faces clenched with anger. She cried out for them to stop her fall but they neither heard nor saw her. Their faces writhed in mutual hatred while she fell and fell—finally crashing at their feet. They looked at her, their eyes vacant.

"Shhhh," said her mother. "It's Betty Jane." Suddenly there was a microphone in front of her mother and she spoke into it, her words booming out until the walls shook. "Falling down and getting all dirty—you're no good just like your father—good little girls don't break their mothers' hearts—you're bad—bad—bad—bad—"

She awakened, her body pulled up into a tight knot. Slowly she broke the dream's paralysis, stretching out her muscles. She rolled over on her stomach, pushing her hand down between the sheet and her smooth belly, rubbing her face against the pillow. She pushed the dream away from her thoughts.

Soon, she thought, she could leave. When she was eighteen she could go live her own life. Maybe she'd become a dancer or a movie star and they would be proud

of her and she'd smile and never remind them of the past. She pictured it all in her mind, her body flooded with pleasure.

After a while the fantasy left her. More fully awake, she moved her legs sensuously against the sheets and stared around her room. She was aware of the outside noises, but she ignored them as part of something she would soon leave.

She'd have a big apartment all her own, she thought. And breakfast in bed every morning.

The door opened and her mother came into the room. She entered aimlessly as though needing to orient herself to her own house. There were lines in her face that were there only on Sunday mornings. Hangover lines, Betty Jane called them secretly.

Cynthia gazed fretfully at the chair where her daughter's clothes were piled. "Why can't you ever learn to hang up your clothes?" she asked and didn't wait for an answer. "Where were you last night?"

"Down at the malt shop," Betty Jane replied automatically.

"I didn't hear you come in," her mother said. There was no meaning in the words. She was just going through the motions of being a mother.

"It was early," Betty Jane said. "You were really living it up, so I just came to bed."

"I don't know why we have parties," her mother said petulantly. "The house is such a mess this morning." Out of habit, she started to pick up Betty Jane's clothes. There was the faint patter of sand on the floor as she lifted the skirt. She bent to examine the tiny grains. When she straightened up, her long pent-up anger was crowding into her face.

"Maybe they have sand in the malt shop?" she asked.

"What?" Betty Jane said. She stared blankly at her mother, not really understanding anything except the fear she felt at the vindictiveness in her mother's face.

"Sand in your clothes," her mother said. She shook the skirt and more sand trickled to the floor. "You weren't in the malt shop last night. You were down on the beach, rolling around with some boy."

"I was not," Betty Jane said frantically. She knew her mother was waiting for an explanation and she tried

desperately to think of something that would cover it or divert this punishing anger. "A couple of the girls and I did go down to the beach for a while. But there weren't any boys. Honest." She knew it was weak, but she couldn't think of anything better.

"Don't lie to me, young lady," her mother shouted. "I never heard such a story in my life. I know what you were doing."

Bob Allen suddenly appeared in the doorway, tugging at his rumpled pajamas. His eyes were bloodshot and his mouth seemed to be trying to turn wrong side out. "What the hell's the noise all about?" he demanded irritably. "Can't you damn women talk without screaming?"

"*Your* daughter," Cynthia said. The italics in her voice pointed the direction of her anger. "She went out last night—god knows who with—and there's sand all over her clothes."

Bob Allen's head hurt and his whole body burned with the fever of unreality. It took a minute for his wife's meaning to penetrate his concern with himself. When it did, anger only made his head throb more as he tried to focus on his daughter. "What's happened?" he shouted. Then, like his wife, he answered the question deep within his own mind. "So that's why you sneaked in last night without letting anyone see you."

Betty Jane's gaze flickered from parent to parent and then she chose the only way out that would save her. "I did not sneak in," she said. "The only reason you didn't see me was because you were too busy muzzling Mrs. Dillon in the kitchen."

"I—" began her father, but the attack was too sudden; the words were jammed in his throat.

"You see," Cynthia cried, wheeling on her husband. "You see. Even your daughter knows the shameful way you carry on in your own home. Is it any wonder she doesn't know how to act decently?"

"It's a lie," he said, but his words lacked conviction. Sudden exposure and a hangover had left him unequipped to defend himself, but he tried valiantly. "Maybe I was whispering something in her ear," he added hopefully.

"Is that why your hand was where it was?" Betty Jane asked maliciously.

"Oh," said Cynthia. It was a small, unassuming word yet she managed to pack into it all the hostility of seventeen years. "Why don't you bring your woman right up to your daughter's bedroom? Maybe then she could learn *all* of your nasty tricks. Or maybe she's already learned them." She turned and ran from the room.

He stood there, for the moment neither husband nor father, while the anger churned in his stomach. He looked around the room, but his wife was gone and slowly his need to lash out at someone focused on his daughter.

"Who was it?" he shouted.

"Nobody," Betty Jane answered, sullen because her respite had been so short-lived. "I swear there was nobody. Why can't you ever believe me when I tell you the truth?"

He didn't hear her. He advanced upon the bed. "By god," he said, "you may think you're big enough to go to the beach with every boy in town, but you're not too big to have the hell whaled out of you for doing it." His right hand raised to strike, he reached down and ripped the covers from her.

The sight of her nude young body stopped him with the force of a physical blow. He had not seen it since she was an infant and that was how he remembered it; not these full-blown, golden curves which aroused more adult emotions. The threat froze in his muscles.

"Cover yourself," he said hoarsely. He seemed to have forgotten that it was he who had uncovered her. "Are you completely shameless?"

Betty Jane didn't understand it, but she knew that the sight of her body had stopped him from striking. It was the first time she had ever seen her father with his anger so paralyzed and useless. She reached down and slowly pulled the sheet up along her body.

It was at this point that Cynthia Allen returned to the room. A single glance took in her husband's position and her daughter's condition.

"Your daughter," she said in a voice of honed metal, "is not Ginny Dillon."

The implication in his wife's words was too great for him to take it all in at once, yet some of it penetrated to his brain and seeped down to his rigid muscles. His hand dropped limply.

"Damn!" he said. His eyes searched around the room. His gaze found the door and he propelled himself toward it. A moment later the bathroom door slammed shut, but the sound of his vomiting carried clearly beyond it.

Cynthia turned to look at her daughter. During her brief absence from the room, she had composed herself—had gone through what she thought of as "facing reality." "Now," she said grimly, "what is done is done. We must make the best of it. Was it Steve Harper?"

"I told you it was nobody," Betty Jane said wearily. "Nothing happened. I didn't even see Steve last night."

"Who was it then?" Cynthia was unaware of what she was doing to Betty Jane. She fully believed herself to be a modern mother talking to her modern daughter. "Tell us and we'll see that he's properly punished." She hesitated but the compulsion to say it was too great: "You'll carry your own punishment with you."

Betty Jane knew it was futile, but she tried again. "You don't understand, Mummy," she said. "There isn't anybody. I haven't done anything."

Cynthia's face tightened. "You're no good, like your father," she said. She was unaware how many times she had repeated this. "You know where you'll end up, young lady, if you persist in this attitude? On the streets. And you'll break your mother's heart." She turned away, clutching at the threatened organ. But at the door she looked back. "You'll stay in your room until you're ready to stop lying. I'll not have you going out and parading your shame before the neighbors." She went out and closed the door.

Betty Jane got out of bed and stood in front of the mirror. She felt as though her body were a battleground. Last night, Johnny Raymond; today, her parents. Her gaze examined the reflection in the mirror, sliding down past her breasts, over her stomach, to where her legs forked out from her body. Like other girls her age, she had experimented with sex—hasty, rough fumblings that brought their own pleasure—but she wondered, as she had before, what all the shouting was about. She studied herself in the mirror as though expecting to find some magic answer that would reveal the whole thing to her.

She took a cigarette from her purse and lit it, blowing smoke at the mirror image. Then she went back to bed.

She had no memories of her mother and father when they were not fighting, few in which they were not shouting angrily at her for one thing or another. Whenever she'd gotten dirty playing in the backyard, when she'd spilled anything or gotten home a few minutes later than she'd been told to, her mother had insisted she was no good. It had happened so often she had begun to believe it herself.

She tried to puzzle through what had happened. She knew that she was the same as she had been the day before; the brief struggle with Johnny Raymond had almost faded from her mind. She sensed that her parents' anger was directed not so much at what they thought had happened as at the signs of it.

Her mind nibbled at a hundred thoughts. She stretched on the bed, aware of the vibrancy of her body. She tried to define the vague yearnings she felt—tried to pierce the mystery of being a woman. She remembered the way boys trembled when they touched her, something she'd paid little attention to before, and somehow connected it with the paralysis that had struck her father when he threw off her bed covers.

She got up and dressed in jeans and an old shirt of her father's. She switched on the radio, turning the dial to a station that broadcast bop. She sprawled in a chair and listened.

Cynthia brought her something to eat and tried a confidential approach. Betty Jane chewed on her sandwich, listened to the music and gave the same answer she had before. It was the only answer she could give, but Cynthia finally left in a rage.

She made three more attempts to gain her daughter's confidence that afternoon. Once with hysterics, once with firmness, and once with tears. They were all the same to Betty Jane. "Nobody," she answered with the patience she had long since learned.

In between her mother's visits, she could hear the quarreling that went on below. Her mother and father alternately shouted at each other and relapsed into smothering silence.

By night they had all been reduced to sullen rage. Bob Allen stamped out of the house and went to the nearest hamburger joint for dinner. Cynthia carried a

tray to Betty Jane's room, then had her own dinner in the kitchen, quickly cleaning up so she could tell her husband she hadn't been able to eat a bite. She went up to see Betty Jane once more, intending to try a girl-to-girl approach but lost her nerve at the door. She went to bed instead.

CHAPTER 3

Monday morning dawned bright and clear. Sometime during the night the storm had passed. Having failed to break Betty Jane's resistance, her parents chose the easier course of finally believing her. Or, rather, of pretending that the whole episode simply hadn't happened. Cynthia greeted her daughter's appearance brightly and Bob grunted a good morning which was no more surly than usual.

Betty Jane put on her bathing suit and spent the rest of the morning sunning herself in the backyard. After lunch, she reverted to jeans and shirt and went down to the village.

She found the usual cluster of boys and girls in front of Jemmy's malt shop. Among them, she spotted Steve Harper. Moved by a perversity she crossed the street and walked down the other side.

She heard the whistle and then the rapid footsteps coming after her. She recognized them both, but kept on going without looking around.

"Betty," he called when he was nearer.

She stopped and waited for him to catch up with her. "Hi, Steve," she said casually, still not looking around.

"Where you going?" he asked.

"Nowhere."

"Let's walk down to the beach."

She shrugged. "Okay."

They turned down the street that led to the beach. They walked almost to the water without talking.

"Where were you Saturday night?" he asked. His efforts to sound casual weren't very successful. "I thought you were coming to the malt shop."

"I said *maybe* I'd be there. I had other things to do."

She looked up at him with a challenge in her blue eyes.

Steve Harper was one year older than Betty Jane. He was tall, with wide shoulders and a deceptively slender body. His black hair looked as if it had never been combed. His face was rugged rather than handsome, but most of the girls envied Betty Jane for his interest in her.

"I waited around for you," he said.

"So what?" she answered flippantly. She saw the raw red bruise on his cheek. "What happened to you? Argument with a revolving door?"

"Nothing," he said, one hand defensively covering the bruise.

They reached the beach and walked across the sand. The tide was coming in, the water creeping up on the deserted beach. They turned to the left where a row of trees grew along the edge of the sand.

Betty Jane sensed the evasion in his last reply and pressed to the attack. "What was it?" she demanded.

"Nothing much," he mumbled. "I had a fight. That's all."

"Who with?"

"Just a guy." He sat down on the sand and she stretched out near him.

"Steve Harper," she said, "you tell me who you had a fight with or I'll never speak to you again."

He refused to look at her. "Johnny Raymond," he said.

It struck her like a blow in the face. "Why?" she asked.

He shrugged, digging a furrow in the sand with his finger. "Just an argument."

"Steve Harper!"

"All right," he grumbled. "He was talking about you and I had a fight with him."

"What did he say?" she asked tightly.

"Nothing much." He saw the expression on her face and gave in as he always did. "He was bragging that you—that you went all the way with him Saturday night."

"Was that all he said?"

"Well, gee, wasn't that enough? He was bragging about it all over town yesterday."

She felt the tightness in her stomach dissolving in anger. There was nobody else to catch the anger as it came boiling up, so she turned it on him. "So what business is it of yours if I did or I didn't?" she demanded hotly.

The hurt was clear on his face. "You know I love you," he said simply. "What kind of a guy would I be to let somebody talk that way about my girl?"

"Maybe I'm not going to be your girl any more," she said. She saw the expression on his face and it only added to her anger. "Well, aren't you going to ask me if it's true?"

He shook his head. "I know it's not true," he said. "That's why I had the fight with him."

She was so astonished she didn't know what to say. When his hand reached over to take hers, she clung to it.

"I know you," he said confidently. "Maybe you're crazy enough to stand me up and go out with him, but that's all. You're my girl."

For a minute she leaned against him, feeling protected and wanted. But only for a moment; then other things crowded into her mind and she jerked herself upright.

"What business is it of anybody's?" she demanded.

"You know how the kids are," he said tolerantly. "They've got to yak about something." He tried to slip his arm around her again, but she moved away from him.

"It's none of your business either," she said. "If I did or didn't, it's my business."

"Relax, Bett. I said I believed you."

"What about you and Joan Randall?" she demanded.

He flushed. "I told you all about that," he said defensively. "I ain't seen her since. Besides it's different for a boy."

"Is it?" she cried. "How?"

"It just is," he said doggedly.

"Maybe I'll find out for myself," she murmured. "I didn't do anything with Johnny Raymond, but maybe I will."

"Bett," he said pleadingly.

"Why shouldn't I?"

His face tightened. "You'd better not," he said.

She tossed her head, taking the challenge. "What will you do, Steve Harper?" she demanded. "Get another black eye? Maybe Johnny Raymond can take care of you and me both."

"Yeah?" he said angrily. "You just stay away from him. That's all."

She laughed, her voice harsh. "I'd like to see you stop me," she retorted. She got up and walked away.

"Betty," he called once. She didn't look around and there were no more calls. She walked rapidly back to town.

She had intended stopping in at the malt shop, but now all she wanted was to get away from it. She knew she couldn't run the gauntlet of sharp eyes and sharper tongues. She kept to the far side of the street and went swiftly by without glancing at the boys and girls on the opposite pavement.

She'd gone two blocks when she heard the running steps behind her and heard her name called. She glanced around and saw Nancy Andrews, the little redhead who was the nearest thing to being her friend. She stopped and waited. Not that she wanted to talk to Nancy either, but she saw no escape.

"Where you going, Bett?" Nancy asked, catching up with her.

"Home."

"Can I come with you?"

Betty Jane nodded reluctantly.

They walked another block in silence before Nancy found the nerve to ask her question.

"Did you?" she asked breathlessly.

"Did I what?" Betty Jane snapped.

"You know what. Go all the way with Johnny Raymond like he says?"

Betty Jane glanced at her in disgust. "You too?" she asked. "Why is everybody so willing to believe what that loud-mouth says?"

"Well, he said it, and I just asked. He wasn't just making it up, was he?" Nancy sounded disappointed.

"Why should I tell you if I did?" Betty Jane wanted to know. She tried to keep the tightness out of her voice.

"Gee, I don't know. I just thought you could tell me if you did. I was wondering what it was like. That's all, Bett."

"Why don't you try it yourself if you want to know?" Betty Jane asked harshly.

Nancy giggled. "I'm afraid to," she said honestly. "I'd be scared. My father'd skin me." She waited hopefully for Betty Jane to continue the conversation, but

when nothing was forthcoming she gave it up. "Going to the sorority meeting tonight?" she asked.

Betty Jane had forgotten about it. She belonged to a high school sorority and they continued to meet every two weeks throughout the summer. Ordinarily she would have looked forward to it, but not now.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe I'll be busy."

There were times when Nancy knew Betty Jane better than she knew herself and this was one of them. "You'd better come," she said.

"Why?"

"Johnny Raymond's been talking all over town, but nobody's sure whether he's just making it up or not. If you don't come tonight everyone will be sure that he's telling the truth."

Betty Jane found her own vocabulary wanting and resorted to her father's. "The son of a bitch," she said bitterly.

"Oh, Bett!"

"I mean it," she said. "I'm never going to have anything to do with men."

"Not even Steve Harper?"

"Especially him."

Nancy sighed. "I wish someone would fight over me," she said.

"You can have them," Betty Jane retorted.

"What are your mother and father going to say?" Nancy wanted to know.

"Nothing happened and they've already said it," Betty Jane answered. She giggled at the memory. Her good humor restored, she told Nancy what had occurred at home the day before. The retelling of her slight triumph over her parents reassured her and when she finished she decided to go that night.

After dinner she went to her room and changed into a skirt and sweater. A few minutes later, she clattered down the stairs.

"Where are you going?" her father grunted, looking up from the television set.

"Sorority meeting at Meg's house," she said.

"Don't stay out too late," her mother said amiably. "Be a good girl."

Betty Jane grinned and ran from the house.

The sorority meetings were usually held at the home of Meg Sanderson, a girl a year older than Betty Jane, because her parents were always considerate enough to go to the movies when the girls wanted to meet there.

Betty Jane stopped to pick up Nancy on the way. There were about fifteen girls already there when they arrived. Their ages ranged from fourteen to eighteen.

Their sorority meetings were hardly as formal as the name suggested. The boys called them chick parties which was perhaps closer to the truth. The girls got together, secure in the knowledge that there were no male ears about, and gossiped, told stories that were slightly risqué (and sometimes not so slightly), talked about other girls they knew, and swapped rumors about their boy friends. Sometimes they had beer or highballs and always there was coffee and cake. Sometimes they played games—charades and cards and occasionally games not so generally known.

Betty Jane could see the question in the eyes of all the girls as she came in, but no one said anything and some of her tension went away as the evening started with no reference to Johnny Raymond.

They sat around on the floor, talking about all the girls who didn't belong to the sorority and exchanging the latest jokes they had heard. A pleasant two hours passed.

"Let's play Rhythm," Meg Sanderson said, "and then we'll have coffee."

The suggestion brought excited cries from a number of the girls. Betty Jane had never cared for the game, but it was always easier to play along than to object.

Rhythm was a pleasant little game, known to most of the high school girls, that was concocted of equal parts of pure malice and titillation. Their parents, however, might have been surprised had they encountered it in its usual form. The girls sat on the floor in a circle. Any one girl could start the game. As all the girls clapped their hands in rhythmic unison, she would call out a letter. The girl sitting on her immediate right had to then call out a word beginning with that letter and do it before the next handclapping. The catch was that the word had to be the first dirty one the girl could think of and if

she failed, or said a clean word, she had to pay a forfeit decided by the other girls.

Meg Sanderson started the game with the letter "P." A little dark-haired girl next to her blurted out her word, blushing and giggling. She gave the letter "C" and Kathy Layton, sitting between her and Betty Jane, coolly supplied a four-letter word. She glanced sideways at Betty Jane and there was malice in her gaze.

"F," she said.

The hands clapped and Betty Jane opened her mouth. The letter suggested only one word, not only to her but to the others as well. Then she saw the avid gaze of every girl in the room fixed on her, with a malevolence that was like a tangible thing pushing against her. She knew suddenly that the game had been suggested for just this moment and that it had been prompted by the rumor Johnny Raymond had been spreading. The word stuck in her throat.

The rhythm was broken. The girls sat with their hands apart and watched her. Their eyes seemed to glisten strangely in the dim light. She was aware only of the solid row of them around the room, all staring at her. It seemed to her that they held every hostile expression: curiosity, accusation, envy, hatred, horror.

"What's wrong, Betty Jane?" the girl next to her asked. "Can't say the nasty old word?"

Her throat was dry. She tried to swallow and couldn't. She could feel the burning flush spreading up into her face. But all she could do was sit and stare back at them.

"She can't *say* it," another girl said, "but—" The unspoken part of the sentence hung there in front of her.

"Forfeit, forfeit," several girls shouted.

"I've got a wonderful idea for a forfeit," said Kathy Layton. "Let's make her tell everything that Johnny Raymond did to her on Saturday night."

"But *everything!*" shouted another girl.

"Forfeit, forfeit!"

She forced her legs to move, to push her up from the floor. She turned and took two faltering steps, then ran from the house. The shrill laughter followed her down onto the sidewalk, flowed after her along the street.

She walked fast, turning automatically down Barnum Boulevard when she reached it. She didn't hear the motor

until the hot rod was beside her. She looked around. It was Johnny Raymond.

"Want to go for a ride, baby?" he asked.

She looked at him and her eyes were fever-bright. "Why not?" she said. She opened the door and climbed in. The hot rod spun away from the curb.

"I was looking for you," he said.

"Yeah?" she asked. "I've been wanting to see you, too. I hear you've got a big mouth."

"What's this big-mouth routine, baby?"

"You've been talking about me all over town."

"Me?" he said in simulated surprise. "What did I say?"

"That I went all the way with you."

"That's a laugh," he said, grinning down at her. "I didn't say anything of the kind. Maybe I said you were a good necker. But that's all."

"How would you know?" she demanded.

"I can tell," he said. "It's written all over you. I give credit where credit's due. You know what, baby?"

"What?"

"Those other babes," he said, whipping the car into Long Beach Road. "They're jealous. That's all."

"Yeah?" she said flatly. She stared at him and was surprised at her own emotion. Earlier she'd been angry at him; now she felt on his side. All her anger was directed at the girls she'd just left. She'd show them, she thought.

He pulled up in front of a delicatessen in Island Park. "I'll be out in a minute," he said. He disappeared inside the store.

He was soon back with a brown paper bag. He set it on the floor and pulled out two cans of beer. He took an opener from his pocket and expertly slashed the tops of each. Betty Jane took the one he handed her and drank deeply of the cool liquid as the hot rod roared away from the store.

"What are you trying to do?" she asked. "Get me tight?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Maybe you think I'll change my mind."

He grinned at her. "What are *you* trying to do, baby?" he asked. "Make a sucker out of Kinsey?"

"Oh, that's too much," she retorted, falling back on the old stand-by.

He chuckled and turned his attention to the car, driving with one hand and tilting the beer can with the other. Betty Jane gulped her beer and watched the road as the hot rod sped over the bridge and into Long Beach. She finished the beer as he swung to the left on Park Avenue. She made no protest when he fished out another can, holding it between his legs until he levered two triangular holes in it, and handed it to her.

She finished the second can as they neared Point Lookout. The beer had sent a delicious warmth through her body, throwing a thin layer of fuzz over her mental awareness. She liked it that way. She stared unseeingly through the windshield. She'd show them, she thought again.

He parked where he had two nights before, swinging the brown paper bag in his hand as he got out of the car. They walked silently past the few night bathers and away from the lights. The sand crunched finely beneath their feet.

A hundred yards into the darkness they stopped and sat down on the sand. A thin trickle of voices floated to them, but only the slap of the water against the beach was near and the spot seemed more deserted than it was.

"Another beer?" he asked.

"Sure," she said carelessly.

There was a sigh of escaping air as he opened the beer and then her fingers closed around the cold can. He lit two cigarettes and passed her one. They sat without talking, staring out over the invisible murmuring ocean.

The sea air was pleasantly cool and smelled heavily of brine. A ghostly gull flitted across their vision and vanished to scold an unseen companion. Betty Jane threw back her head and let the cold beer wash down her throat to start its dozen little fires in her body.

Their beer cans made twin splashes in the ocean. Then she was in his arms, the touch of his hands building the fires that were already kindled.

For a brief moment she instinctively stiffened against the unexpected, then relaxed on the sand. She was aware of her body as she had never been before. Even her one small cry of pain was lost in a sudden burning need.

The hot rod eased to the curb a block away from her

home. Betty Jane yielded to a last brief, hard kiss, then stepped out and walked rapidly toward the house. Behind her, the car looped around and drifted off.

She opened the door quietly and slipped inside. The lights were on in the living room and she heard the voice of a famous TV comedian. She had a brief glimpse of her mother and father in prayerful attitudes before the television set, but neither of them looked up. She'd lost all sense of time, but the program told her that it was still early. She hesitated for a moment, torn between a desire to speak to them and a fear that they might guess what had happened—then closed the door and ran upstairs before they could see her.

In her own room, she quickly undressed and pulled on her robe. She went into the bathroom and locked the door. She filled the tub with hot water, dropped the robe to the floor and stepped into it.

She sat there, soaking, her mind nibbling around the edges of what had happened. She could consider it up to a certain point, then her thoughts veered sharply away, returning only to the time afterward when they lay on the sand side by side.

She looked down at her body, her gaze going searchingly over her breasts, down across the rib cage, across her flat belly, skirting around one thigh. She searched the water and herself for the stain that didn't exist. There was no way to tell, she thought in wonder. No mark on her body, nothing that looked any different than it had before.

Was it true, as they said, that it showed in the eyes? Her breath caught in her throat. She'd heard one of the boys bragging about it. She stood up in the bath, stretching her neck until she could see herself in the mirror. Clear blue eyes gazing into themselves. There was nothing there. Only innocent eyes, maybe a little frightened. She sighed and slid back into the water.

She shifted about with a vague sensation of guilt. She wrestled with a nameless shame and told herself it was useless to be sorry. There was nothing to it after all. She'd heard the other girls talk, read stories in the newspapers. There were the people in books. Her father and Ginny Dillon. She remembered a story that had been in the papers. A rich playboy and several girls—girls who

sold themselves and went to night clubs swathed in mink and ermine. She'd read the story, then heard her father talking about it. Everyone seemed to think such girls were clever. A hundred dollars from one man, fifty from another. Mink and diamonds. A Cadillac in every bed. She giggled to herself and splashed the water.

Somehow the guilt and shame were washed away by the water. And what was left? Her mind once more skirted the thing that had actually happened and came circling back to it. All that was left was a vague, unnamed disappointment.

What had she expected? She didn't know, but it had been more than a stab of pain, a moment of teetering on the edge of something threatening and unknown, then back to the sodden awareness of sand gritting against her bare legs. What was all the noise about, she asked herself. Was this the goal of all the fumbling she'd found so exciting? Was this the thing that had sent her mother and father into such a rage, their voices beating at her relentlessly?

She soaped the washcloth and tried to scrub away the uncertainty.

Maybe, she thought, she'd go into a convent. She played with the picture of the stiff, white linen framing her face and imagined the horror of her Protestant parents. She giggled softly as she toweled the water from her body. The rough terrycloth was pleasant against her skin and she quickly forgot the fantasy.

She returned to her room and went to sleep almost immediately. One hand, with the smooth sheet wrapped tightly about it, pressed gently against her cheek.

CHAPTER 4

This was the way it was when Betty Jane Allen became a woman. The combination of a bragging boy and some malicious girls had driven her over the edge of restraint. A little pleasure, a little pain and a lot of disappointment. Here it might have ended—the disappointment losing its edge until the coming of a man who could rebuild the fire that had died in its first kindling—

but for the fact that Betty Jane lived among people who were incapable of leaving well enough alone.

Her wounds were whole again when she awakened the next morning. She was merely amused when her mother expressed pleasure because she had come home early the night before. For a brief moment, there was a strange warmth between mother and daughter; Cynthia Allen's failure was that she didn't recognize it for what it was.

"Someday," she said with considerable self-satisfaction, "you'll thank your father and me for not wanting you to be pawed over by every boy that comes along." They were simple enough words, but in some fashion Cynthia Allen managed to nasty them up in the delivery until Betty Jane couldn't look at her.

"Virtue," Cynthia said hollowly, "is your most precious possession."

"What's so precious about it?" Betty Jane asked. Since she had experienced neither loss nor gain the night before, it was an honest question.

Unable to supply a direct answer, Cynthia Allen fell back on anger. "If you're not careful, you'll find out when it's too late," she said darkly and slammed out of her daughter's room.

Nor was lack of understanding confined to her home. As in other small towns, news was quickly absorbed into the bloodstream of Lotus Park. Everyone was a carrier. When Betty Jane went into the village, she had to run the gauntlet of catty remarks from the girls; the boys eyed her with knowing looks and dropped pointed words in the wake of her passing. Within a couple of weeks, the rumors had spread beyond her own age group. Older men she met on the street eyed her thoughtfully and older women sniffed audibly when they encountered her.

Steve Harper was different, but not enough. They still made dates and he was careful never to mention Johnny Raymond. Too careful. There was something in his attitude which made Betty Jane feel she was being forgiven and that made her angrier than his one attack.

The combined efforts of her parents and the townspeople did the one thing that nothing else could have accomplished. It drove her back to Johnny Raymond. Except for that she might never have gone out with him

again. The brief welding of their flesh on the sandy beach had offered her so little that it alone could never have sent her back for more. But the rejection she felt from everyone did it.

Johnny Raymond, she soon discovered, did not reject her. He was eager to see her and filled with praise for her meager accomplishments. He wanted something, but so did everyone else and the others were less gracious about it. To Betty Jane it seemed like a fair trade. She began to see him once a week, driving with him in the hot rod to Point Lookout or down to one of the undeveloped fields along Hog Island Channel for stolen moments of love-making. In a way she came to enjoy it, although her pleasure came from his lack of control rather than her own.

The more she saw of Johnny Raymond, the more everyone talked. Betty Jane knew it and came to glory in it. Shortly after her fourth date with him, she ran into Nancy Andrews, her red-headed friend.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go over to Jemmy's for a coke."

Nancy flushed and scuffed her feet along the sidewalk. "I—I can't," she said miserably.

"Why not?"

"I just can't."

"Got a heavy date?" Betty Jane demanded.

Nancy shook her head.

"Then why not?" Betty Jane wanted to know.

"It's—it's my mother," Nancy said finally. Her face was crimson. "She's heard about you and Johnny Raymond. She said if she saw me with you again she wouldn't let me out of the house for a month."

Betty Jane experienced a moment of shocked silence, but she rallied quickly. "I don't care," she said, tossing her head.

"I'm sorry, Bett," Nancy almost whispered.

"You know what you can do," Betty Jane said harshly. "If you want to be a baby all your life, I'm sure I won't do anything to interfere." She walked quickly away, ignoring the muffled sobs behind her.

The next week she kept her regular date with Johnny Raymond. They drove back from Point Lookout early enough to reach home by ten. That had been her one

precaution and almost two months had passed without anything but praise from her parents.

The hot rod coasted to a stop a half-block from her house.

"Okay, kid," Johnny Raymond said. "See you next week?"

"Maybe," she said.

"You'd better," he told her. He reached out and tousled her hair. "You're out of this world, baby. The most."

She twisted in the seat so that her breasts brushed against his arm, then moved away as he reached for her in automatic response. She'd opened the door and stepped out on the sidewalk before she was aware that they weren't alone. A tall, shadowy figure had suddenly appeared beside her. Startled, she didn't recognize him until he spoke.

"Out of the way, Bett," he said. It was Steve Harper. He'd been waiting in the shadow of the trees along the sidewalk.

Johnny Raymond could have gunned the motor and gotten away before Steve could stop him, but he didn't. He sat, with a tight grin on his face, while Steve reached into the car and shut off the motor.

"Get out," Steve said.

"What's the matter, kid?" Johnny asked. He was conscious that Betty Jane was the gallery. "Didn't you get enough lumps the first time?"

"Just get out," Steve said thickly.

Johnny Raymond kicked the door open with his foot and leaped from the car, swinging.

Betty Jane huddled against a tree, rooted there by fearful indecision. The two boys fought silently except for the sharp rasp of their breathing and the thud of their blows.

The fight was over as suddenly as it had started. A wild swing of Steve's connected and Johnny staggered off balance. Steve rushed in with a flurry of blows. Johnny crashed back against the car, cracking his head on the top and slumping down in the open doorway. He was still conscious, but groggy. He made one half-hearted attempt to stand up, then sagged back on the floor of the car. Steve Harper turned to face Betty Jane.

Anger suddenly released her from the thrall of fear. "Steve Harper," she said, "what do—"

"Shut up," he said roughly. "I want to talk to you. Come on." He took her by the arm and forced her across the street. She angrily shook her arm loose from his grip, but continued to walk beside him. They turned at the next corner and went down the side street that led to the water.

Four blocks later they emerged from Lotus Park onto a stretch of beach where Barnum Island Creek poured into Reynolds Channel. The beach was deserted, the thin strip of sand dimly lighted by the moon. He stopped, swinging around to face her.

"You listen to me, Steve Harper," Betty Jane began furiously.

"No," he said harshly. The moonlight sharpened the tenseness in his face. He gripped her arms tightly. "This time you're going to listen to me."

Betty Jane was afraid of anger. She sensed that Steve was too enraged to be quelled by her usual scorn. She automatically reacted to the situation by pushing her own anger out of her conscious thoughts. She leaned closer to him and waited.

"I thought I told you to stay away from Johnny Raymond," he said grimly.

"You did," she said softly. "I'm sorry, Steve, but you haven't been paying much attention to me. I—I was lonely and Johnny's the only one who's been friendly. . . ."

She leaned closer to him. His fingers loosened their grip on her arms, then his arms went around her. She pressed tightly against him, lifting her face.

"Don't be mad at me," she whispered. "Just hold me."

She lifted her face farther and his lips came down to meet hers. She could feel the anger draining out of his muscles.

He raised his head and looked at her. "Bett—" he said.

"Don't talk," she said swiftly. "Make love to me. Steve . . ."

Their lips came together again. She ground her mouth and her body against him. She felt his own body answering. She slowly tore her lips from his, half-turning as though to sit on the sand. She felt sure of herself and

she confused the sense of victory with pleasure of another kind.

"Bett," he said, "listen to me."

The way his voice shook added to her feeling of power. "You want to talk?" she asked, laughing up at him.

"No," he admitted. "I don't want to talk. I want the same thing you do. But maybe I want it a different way. You've got to listen to me, Bett."

It took her a minute or two to realize what he was saying. Even then, she didn't fully understand it; she only knew that in some way he was rejecting what she offered.

"What about?" she asked sullenly. She tried to pull away from him, but he held onto her.

"Look, Bett," he said, "I'm in love with you. I guess I've always been. Remember even three years ago we decided we were in love and we'd get married when we grew up?"

"Kid stuff," she said.

"Partly it was—but only partly. I've never changed my mind about it. I don't think you have either—really. Another year, Bett, and I'll be eighteen. If I'm not drafted, I'll get a job and we can get married right away."

"And if you get drafted, what do I do?" she challenged. "Just sit around with my hands folded?"

"If I'm drafted, we could still get married. You'd get an allotment."

"A big deal," she sneered. "You're so generous to me."

She could see his face tighten in the moonlight. "I know you like I know myself," he said. "I know what the last few weeks have been for you. Sure, you got a kick out of going out with Johnny. I can understand that. Then he shot off his yap and everybody started putting claws into you. So you had to show them by going out with Johnny again. You're just like a little dog; if you get kicked, you're determined to show them what a bad dog you are."

"Now you're calling me a bitch," she said.

"I am not. You know better than that. I'm just saying that I know how you felt with everybody talking."

"What if I did go all the way with Johnny?" she asked.

His face tightened. "If you did, I don't want to hear

about it," he said roughly. He took a deep breath. "I just don't believe you did. That's all. And you're not going to. We'll just forget about it, Bett. But don't see Johnny Raymond any more."

"So we'll just forget about it," she said mockingly. "And I'm not to see Johnny any more. Who do you think you're ordering around?"

"Forget about it," he said. "Come on. I'll walk you home."

"You'll walk me home. Is that all?"

"That's all," he said flatly.

"Well, I can walk myself home. And I'll see Johnny Raymond whenever I feel like it."

"You do and you'll not see me again," he said angrily.

"I've seen too much of you already," she retorted.

"I'm telling you," he said again, "to stay away from Johnny. I'll slap some sense into you if nothing else will do it."

"You and who else?" she asked. She laughed scornfully. She turned and walked a few steps, then she stopped and looked back at him. "You're just a kid," she said maliciously. "Maybe you can come around and take me for a walk again when you're a man. But stay away from me until then."

"I'll stay away from you," he snapped.

She turned and left, almost running.

She quickly covered the four blocks to her home. It was almost eleven o'clock. The minute she stepped into the foyer she knew that something was wrong. Her mother and father were in the living room, but neither the radio nor television was blaring. She headed for the stairway, knowing she wouldn't make it.

"Young lady," her mother called sharply, "come in here."

She turned and stepped obediently into the living room. Her mother and father sat facing her, their bodies rigid, their faces frozen in the masks of hostility she knew so well.

"Where have you been?" her father demanded.

"Out for a walk with Steve."

"Don't lie to us," her mother said. "I talked to Sarah Andrews today." She pressed one hand to her head in an attitude of great suffering. "Why is it that a mother

has to be the last one to hear the gossip that's going on about her own daughter?"

Betty Jane said nothing, waiting patiently for the rest of it.

"We know all about you and this Johnny Raymond," her father shouted. "We'll take care of him, too."

Cynthia Allen's mouth was like a wound in her face. "Betty Jane," she said, "we have only your best interests at heart. You tell us all about it and we'll have that young man arrested so quick he won't know what happened."

"There's nothing to tell," Betty Jane said. She was braced against their anger, waiting tensely for the opportunity to turn it away from herself. The chance came quickly, as it always did.

Bob Allen rubbed the back of his neck where it ached and glared at his daughter. "Maybe you like being pawed over by any man that comes along. Is that the kind of girl you are?"

Betty Jane's blue eyes stared demurely at her father. "You mean like Mrs. Dillon?" she asked.

"Shut up," her father growled.

"You see," Cynthia Allen said triumphantly. She forgot her daughter as she wheeled on her husband. "You see where your daughter learned how to behave? You see what you've done, carrying on in your own home?"

For a moment Bob Allen looked stricken, swinging his head back and forth like a wounded animal seeking the origin of attack. His angry gaze finally settled on his wife. "You're the one," he said thickly, "who's always making something out of an innocent friendship."

Cynthia Allen snorted loudly. "A drunken lecher for a father," she said. "It's no wonder she's turning out the way she is. You—"

Betty Jane turned and left, unnoticed. Upstairs she quickly went to bed, shutting out the sound of the angry voices below, and slipped into the fantasy of leaving home.

CHAPTER 5

The need to turn fantasy into reality had become too great for Betty Jane Allen. It was only two weeks before the opening of school. The idea of going back to Oceanside High was as repellent as the one of staying home. Once she was back in school there would be no way of escaping the jibes of the boys and girls.

Johnny Raymond had already served his purpose. Nothing more could be accomplished by going out with him. She thought of herself as a woman of the world, who was being denied admission to that world.

It was the day after her encounter with Steve Harper that Betty Jane decided that she would take the step about which she had so long dreamed. She knew that it would have to be done carefully; among other things she would need clothes that would make her look older. At least, one dress that was smart. There was no point to asking her parents for it so soon after their hearing the gossip. Her own resources were inadequate; she had a little more than twenty-five dollars saved. She brooded about it for a whole day before she hit upon a plan of action.

Next morning she dressed with care while her mother was out shopping. After trying on everything she owned, she finally decided that a sweater and skirt would serve her purposes best. They did not make her look much older, but they at least fit tightly enough to show she was far from childhood. She struggled with her hair until it had assumed more sophisticated lines. She put on her make-up carefully, but more heavily than usual. Some of her mother's perfume added what she hoped was the final touch of worldliness. Then she walked to Long Beach Road and caught the bus into Oceanside. There, she took the train to New York.

Dillon's Dresses, Inc., was on Thirty-second Street, not far from Penn Station. She walked there from the train, catching the excitement of the bustling street. She found Dillon's name on the board in the lobby and stepped into the elevator.

The dress house occupied one entire floor. Betty Jane stepped out of the elevator to face the receptionist, a pretty, dark-haired girl five or six years older than herself.

"I want to see Mr. Dillon," she said confidently.

The receptionist's gaze was hard and knowing. It was the look of one who had seen a parade of young girls file through her office on their way to see the owner of the dress house. Betty Jane had no way of knowing this, but she recognized the gaze. It was similar to the expressions the girls wore when they talked about Johnny Raymond in her presence. She returned it with her most innocent stare.

"What's your name?" the receptionist asked coolly.

"Tell Mr. Dillon that Robert Allen's daughter is here to see him," she said. The slightly false tone of voice was one she'd learned from the movies.

"Your father sent you?" the receptionist asked.

"Naturally."

The receptionist shook her head, as though expressing a private opinion of fathers, and turned to the switchboard. A moment later she turned back. "He'll see you," she said. "In there." She indicated the one private door in sight.

Now that she was faced with it, Betty Jane almost lost her nerve. Her heart was beating furiously, but she forced herself to walk calmly across the reception room and open the door.

The office was a surprise after the air of frantic confusion which seemed to exist in the rest of the loft. The walls were paneled in light pine. The furniture, including a small bar and a studio couch, was modern and expensive-looking.

Teddy Dillon stood up behind his desk and gave her a friend-of-the-family smile. Although a little on the heavy side, he was still a handsome man. It was obvious from the way he dressed that he was well aware of this.

"Well," he said jovially, "what's that father of yours up to now? He must want something or he would've come himself."

Betty Jane closed the door behind her and stepped closer to the desk. "I'm sorry, Mr. Dillon," she said, "but I guess maybe I told the girl a lie."

He looked puzzled. "What?"

"My father didn't send me," she said softly. "It was my own idea. In fact, neither he nor mother even know I'm here."

For the first time, Dillon really looked at her. His gaze traveled swiftly over her. It hesitated just long enough at the right places to restore Betty Jane's self-confidence. When his gaze finally lifted to meet hers, his eyes held a contradiction of expressions.

"Well," he said with exaggerated gallantry, "what can I do for my good friend's daughter?" His smile as he stepped out from behind the desk was half-paternal and half-something else which Betty Jane thought she recognized.

Betty Jane pirouetted slowly, being sure to take a deep breath as she paused in profile. "Mr. Dillon," she said, "do you think I've grown up?" She faced him, looking for and finding the answer in his eyes.

He nodded. "You're certainly a bigger girl than I had realized—Betty Jane, isn't it?"

"Everybody realizes it except my mother and father," she said bitterly. "I want to stop dressing like a kid, but my father won't even listen when I try to talk to him. So I've just decided to get the clothes I want myself and I knew you were the man who could help me."

He looked surprised. "Why did you come to me?"

"My father said you often gave young girls dresses when they came up to see you." She hesitated a moment. "Of course, I don't expect you to give them to me. I've got twenty-five dollars of my own."

He stared at her searchingly. Teddy Dillon felt that his feet were being guided onto pleasant but dangerous ground. "Did your father say why I gave the girls dresses?" he asked slowly.

Her blue eyes opened wide. "I guess it must have been because you liked them."

"What about them liking me?" he asked, the teasing tone creeping unconsciously into his voice.

"But everybody must like you," she said. "You're so big and handsome—and nice."

Teddy Dillon licked his lips nervously. "I'm afraid your father wouldn't like it if he knew I helped you . . ."

"He'd never know," she cried. She stepped closer, grasping the lapels of his coat with both hands. Although

he didn't seem aware of it, her body touched his ever so lightly. "You will help me, won't you, Mr. Dillon? Please?"

It was bribery that few men could have resisted. Teddy Dillon was not one of the few. He managed to pat her hand in a fatherly fashion, but that one effort exhausted the last of his paternal feelings. It was clear that he now struggled with a more powerful emotion. "All that we carry," he said and his voice had thickened, "is cocktail dresses . . ."

"I'd love a cocktail dress," she said.

He stood looking at her for a moment, and Betty Jane sensed dimly that he was going through a struggle with his conscience. Dillon had stopped playing the paternal role, and he was debating whether he dare risk the more serious one of lover. It was obvious that the only reason he hesitated was the fact that she was Bob Allen's daughter. But similar situations must have worn down his conscience to the point where it had little resistance to offer.

Betty Jane wished he'd hurry and make up his mind. As she stood brushing lightly against him, with just the right look of appealing helplessness, her confidence in her own power did not falter.

At last his eyes dropped. "All right," he said smoothly. "What size do you wear?"

"Ten."

"Be right back," he said. He went out into the loft, to return with five different dresses all in her size. "Which one do you like?" he asked pointedly.

"Oh," she exclaimed in delight, "they are *all* beautiful." One by one, she held them up in front of her, moving around the room in a little dance of pleasure. "I like them all. Can you just have them wrapped in one package?"

"One dress," Teddy Dillon said firmly. He smiled at her. "For now," he added. He went out and returned shortly with a neatly wrapped box.

Betty Jane put on her sweetest smile as she took it. "Thank you," she said. "I really don't know how I can thank you."

"There is a way," Teddy Dillon said evenly.

Betty Jane had carefully reckoned the cost of her plan before leaving home, but she still managed to turn her most innocent gaze upon him. "Oh, I'd do anything to

repay you," she said. She managed to make the "anything" sound like "everything" and "nothing" simultaneously. She was willing to pay, but the price had to be asked.

"Put the box down," Teddy Dillon said.

Betty Jane dutifully placed the box on his desk and stood looking at him expectantly. She could feel the excitement stealing through her body in waves of warmth, but it was a response to the conquest rather than to any more personal emotion.

"We might at least visit a while," Teddy Dillon said, trying to sound casual. "Would you like a drink, Betty Jane?"

"No, thank you," she said demurely.

He lit a cigarette and almost immediately snubbed it out. He stepped closer to her. "I like to give things," he said, "but then I like to have things given to me too. Don't you think that's only fair?"

"Oh, definitely . . ."

He took another step and reached for her hand. "You're a very beautiful girl, Betty Jane. The boys must flock around you like flies around honey."

She shrugged. "Oh, boys! I don't like boys much. They're so silly. Not like you . . ."

"Hell," he said, looking down at her, "here I've been thinking of you as a little girl . . ."

"I know," she said softly, and permitted herself a warm, little laugh.

He put his arm around her waist. She let him draw her still closer and gloried in the rush of power which surged through her. He smelled of cigar smoke, alcohol and after-shave lotion; a heady combination that reminded her of her father. She was unaware that this increased her sense of triumph.

He pulled her tightly against him, pressing his mouth on hers. She let him force her lips apart. His hand glided over her breasts and she submitted to his practiced caresses. Then as he fumbled with her skirt, she let her throat form the sounds of pleasure which she had already discovered were expected of her . . .

When she left the loft some time later, she thought of nothing but the dress she carried with her. It wasn't

as much as she had expected, but it *was* a beginning. Its acquisition somehow symbolized leaving home.

She hurried back to Penn Station and caught the next train to Oceanside. She knew she was well within her schedule. It was a Thursday, her mother's afternoon for playing canasta with several of her friends in Lotus Park. Betty Jane could still manage to get home a good hour before she did.

Betty Jane was only a couple of blocks from Sycamore Lane when she heard the familiar chuckle of the hot rod. She continued to walk at the same pace, not looking around. The car pulled alongside of her.

"Hi, stuff," said Johnny Raymond.

She turned and looked at him as if he were a stranger. In a way he was now. Not long ago he had been the older man in her eyes; now with her new dress, badge of easily earned maturity, he seemed like a kid to her.

"Hello," she said loftily. She continued walking and the hot rod crawled along in the street, keeping pace.

"Been getting some happy rags?"

"I've been shopping," she said.

"Look who's talking like a big-time operator now," Johnny Raymond said with a grin. "How about getting together tonight?"

She glanced at him coolly. "I'm afraid that it's quite impossible."

His face darkened. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Is it because of what happened with Steve Harper the other night? If I hadn't cracked my head on the car, he wouldn't have walked away. I would've Marcianoed him!"

"I'm really not interested," she said flatly, "in what you and Steve Harper do. It's quite unimportant."

"What do you mean?"

"Please don't continue bothering me," she said. "I have no time for—children."

"Hell," he said. "Get a load of Miss Big Bitch." He gunned the motor viciously and the tires screeched as the car leaped away from the curb.

Betty Jane continued on home without further interruptions. Her only fear was that she might encounter a neighbor who would later say something to her mother

about the package, but everyone seemed to be busy indoors.

Up in her room, she quickly unpacked the dress and hung it up with her other clothes. She shoved the box in the back of the closet. Then she changed, putting on a pair of jeans and a discarded shirt of her father's, and with a feeling of bravado went down to the malt shop.

Dinner was already on the table and her mother and father were just sitting down when Betty Jane came back.

"About time you were getting here," her father grunted as she took her seat.

Her mother said nothing, an obvious sign that she was in bad humor. There was further evidence in the tight lines of her face. Betty Jane had no way of knowing the cause. It might have been the canasta game, something that happened with her husband, or she might have heard more gossip. Betty Jane soon ruled out the middle guess for she saw that her father was equally puzzled by the tense atmosphere. Betty Jane turned her attention to her food and tried to ignore it.

"What the hell's eating you?" Bob Allen suddenly demanded halfway through dinner.

"If you're speaking to me," Cynthia Allen said, long-sufferingly, "I'm trying to enjoy my dinner in peace and quiet."

Bob Allen's laugh was sharp and unhumorous. "Like hell you are. You're steamed up about something. What is it?"

"If I have anything to discuss," Cynthia said icily, "we'll do it after dinner. I intend to eat in peace."

This too was part of an old story. Betty Jane could remember the hundreds of times she had sat at this table, knowing that she was going to be punished when the meal was over but never knowing in advance for what. On such occasions, the three of them would eat in grim silence. By the time the meal was over they would all have indigestion. And the punishment was never as bad as that dragged-out interval of waiting.

They ate dinner laboriously, each bent over his own plate. Neither Betty Jane nor her father was sure which one might be the target of Cynthia's anger and both were made miserable by a vague sense of guilt.

Cynthia Allen finished the last of her coffee and dabbed

primly at her mouth with a napkin. She leaned back and fixed her gaze on her husband. This was Betty Jane's first hint that she was to be the target. She braced herself for the attack.

"Robert," Cynthia said, the use of her husband's formal name indicating the seriousness of the matter, "I would like your complete attention."

Bob Allen was equally familiar with the signposts of his wife's moods and his relief at realizing his daughter was the chosen victim showed in his voice. "What's Betty Jane done now?" he asked.

"That is what I intend to find out," Cynthia said grimly. "She left the house this morning while I was shopping and didn't come home until some time this afternoon. When I got back from my canasta game, I was straightening up her room and what do you think I found? A brand-new cocktail dress. It must have cost at least thirty-five dollars. Where did you get it, young lady?"

In a way, Betty Jane was relieved that it was out in the open. At least, she knew why her mother was angry. "It was given to me," she said.

The two angry faces converged upon her. "By who?" her mother demanded.

"Why was it given to you?" her father shouted.

"It was just given to me," Betty Jane said. Suddenly her own anger flared up to meet theirs. "Why do you always think I had to do something if I get anything?"

"Nobody gives a young girl a dress without getting something in return," Bob Allen said. "You think you can tell us the world is full of Santa Clauses?"

"Who was it?" her mother repeated.

"I won't tell you," Betty Jane said wildly.

There was a moment of shocked silence while the three of them glared at each other.

"Go to your room," Cynthia Allen cried. Her face was stiff with rage. "You can just stay there until we decide what's to be done with you."

Betty Jane got up and almost ran from the table. Upstairs, she slammed the door of her room as hard as she could.

Through the rest of the evening she could hear the rumble of voices from below. Occasionally they would be

raised, but there was less open quarreling than usual. And Cynthia did not come up for any of her usual motherly talks. Later, Betty Jane heard them both tramp silently past her room on their way to bed.

She waited until she thought they were asleep. Then she quickly changed clothes. She packed the rest of her small wardrobe into a suitcase. She put on an old pair of sneakers. Then she opened her dormer window and threw her shoes and the suitcase to the ground. Her door was locked on the inside so there was no chance of their surprising her. She climbed out the window and crept down the roof to the eaves. She hesitated a moment, then jumped into the darkness below.

She lit silently on the grass. She fumbled around for a few minutes and found her shoes. It took only a moment to slip them on and toss the sneakers away. Then she found her suitcase and walked swiftly across the yard.

On Long Beach Road, she caught the bus to Oceanside and from there a train to New York. She took the subway to Times Square. For a minute she stood on the street, staring at the lights of Broadway. She had a bag full of clothes, twenty-five dollars in cash, and a delirious sense of being free. At the moment, it seemed that these were all she needed.

Not far off Times Square she found a small hotel, where she registered as Betty J. Chalice from Cleveland, Ohio. It was a name she had long ago picked for herself when a bunch of the girls were playing a game of choosing new names.

The room was small and musty, with a neon sign throwing a red haze through the window every few seconds, but it seemed the height of luxury to her. Betty Jane Chalice sat on the lumpy bed and hugged herself in sheer delight.

CHAPTER 6

New York is everything to everybody, but it was especially so to Betty Jane. Though only fifty minutes on the train from Lotus Park, to her it was thousands of miles away. Awake or asleep, it had dominated her

dreams since the day she had started marking time until she could leave home. Now that she was here, safely registered in a hotel, she felt that her new life was already an accomplished fact.

She awakened that first morning in New York and the past was gone. She knew, vaguely, that her mother and father would make a search for her; she thought that after a day or two they would probably call in the police; but she was confident that the city would swallow her. She had thought it all out many times before, so she wasted no more thought now to what might happen.

She was equally confident about the future. She intended to work, but not at any prosaic job. She had also given that a lot of thought. She would become a model, perhaps, or maybe go on the stage. In either case, she knew that contacts were the important thing. She would waste no time haunting agencies and production offices. There was only one word in her lexicon of power: men. Glamorous men who frequented the night clubs and who would start a girl on her career or give her a mink coat as easily as some men offered a ride in a hot rod or parted with a dress.

It was only a question of time. Betty Jane was a realist, in spite of her fantasies. She knew that she would need more money than the twenty-five dollars in her purse. She had thought about it the night before when she was trying to go to sleep.

She had a late breakfast in the hotel coffee shop. It was almost noon when she took the subway downtown. She got off at Thirty-fourth Street and walked the few blocks to Dillon Dresses.

The receptionist's eyebrows arched eloquently, but she said nothing as Betty Jane asked for Teddy Dillon. She consulted her switchboard and nodded toward the private door. Betty Jane went through it, feeling more confident than she had the day before.

Teddy Dillon looked up, uncertain what this visit meant but automatically pushing his face into a smile.

"Well," he said, his gaze sweeping over her, "aren't you all dolled up today. Don't tell me that you want another new dress already?" A chuckle covered the anxiety in his voice.

"Oh, no," Betty Jane said. "It's just that you were so

wonderful to me yesterday, I had to come back to thank you." She stepped around the desk and dropped herself on his lap. "Oh, Teddy, I wish I could stay with you forever."

Teddy Dillon was not a complicated man and suspicion was pushed away by his expanding ego. "That would be nice," he said, with another chuckle, "but I'm afraid not very practical. I wouldn't get much work done with you around."

"I know," she said sadly. She leaned back, putting her arm around him and letting her finger tips trail across the back of his neck.

Teddy Dillon tried to fight against his own responses. Partly because of his guilt and partly because he did have work to do.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that everything happened a little too quickly yesterday. After all, your mother and father are my friends and I expect that they wouldn't approve of your coming here to see me." If he was aware of the enormity of this understatement, it didn't show on his face.

"To hell with what Daddy approves," Betty Jane said. "I ran away from home last night."

Dillon was startled, but Betty Jane didn't give him a chance to do much thinking about it. She leaned over and pressed her lips against his. It was only a second before she felt him responding.

When she finally pulled her lips away, Teddy Dillon's good intentions of a few minutes before were considerably weakened.

"That's another reason I wanted to see you," she went on. "I want to borrow a hundred dollars."

That startled him a little more. Cupidity struggled with passion. "We'll talk about it later," he said thickly, steering her in the direction of the studio couch.

"Now," she said firmly. She had come a long way from the uncertain girl who had entered that same office twenty-four hours earlier. "Will you loan me the hundred dollars, Teddy?"

"What the hell does a kid like you need with a hundred bucks?" he asked roughly.

"I told you I ran away from home last night. I need the money to live in New York. I don't want to have

to go back home." She paused a moment and her voice was almost too sweet and innocent when she continued. "If I had to go back, my father would make me tell everywhere I'd been—including here."

Teddy Dillon's mind was on other matters. He struggled to get the meaning behind her words and tone. "But—" he began.

Betty Jane moved away from him, straightening her dress. She stared demurely at the carpet. "After all," she said, "I'm only sixteen years old." Then because the use of her power was a new thing and she wanted to be sure, she made the picture a little clearer. "Jailbait. Sing Sing quail." She licked her lips nervously.

That did it. Her words left Teddy Dillon if not a cleaner man at least a purer one for the moment, for it instantly purged him of all desire. It was even possible that the purge might last for some time. Teddy Dillon's adventures with young girls had been rather fewer than he had led his friends to think and the transactions had always been brief, ending on a note of mutual gratitude. The situation which now confronted him was new and frightening; it jarred the personal picture he carried of himself.

"You will loan me the money, won't you?" Betty Jane asked.

There was no longer any conflict in Teddy Dillon's mind. The things intimated by Betty Jane's threat were so horrible his response was automatic, almost Pavlovian. "A hundred dollars, was it?" he asked, his hand diving into his pocket. He pulled out a wad of bills, from which his trembling fingers separated what he thought were five twenties. There were actually six, but Betty Jane decided not to point out the error.

He pushed the money into her hand. "There," he said. His mind tried to rearrange the picture. "Of course, I'll loan you the money. I've been your father's friend for years. A fine thing if I couldn't help his daughter." He tried to chuckle, but it came out more like a death rattle.

Betty Jane tucked the bills into her purse. "Thank you," she said. She glanced hesitantly toward the studio couch.

Teddy Dillon divined her meaning immediately. "No, no," he said hurriedly. He tugged at his collar. "I—I have

some men coming to see me—a very important conference. You run along. I—I'll call you sometime."

"All right," Betty Jane said relieved. She walked to the door and through it without looking back. She felt terribly grown-up and mature and paid no attention to anyone on her way to the elevator. She didn't know that as soon as she'd left the office Teddy Dillon had picked up the phone and told the receptionist never to let her in again. She wouldn't have cared if she had known. She was on her way, determined to do no looking back. As she stepped out of the building, Betty Jane Allen ceased to exist; from then on, it was Betty Jane Chalice against the world.

The next week was not nearly as eventful as Betty Jane had expected it to be. She read Walter Winchell, Danton Walker, Ed Sullivan and Dorothy Kilgallen religiously, but imagining herself in the places they described was as near as she came to seeing them. Not that she didn't try; but she soon discovered that an unescorted girl had little chance of getting into most of the night clubs.

She didn't give up trying. Sensing that they would be inaccessible, she soon by-passed such places as the Stork Club and El Morocco and concentrated on the smaller clubs. There was one in particular, El Manzella on East Fifty-third Street, which she made a point of passing every night. One night she had seen two young men get out of a yellow convertible to be welcomed by the doorman. One of them was a tall, broad-shouldered blond. He had the cosmopolitan-Hollywood handsomeness that distinguished the men of her rather conventional fantasies. She saw the yellow convertible parked in front of the club on other nights, so she knew the two men were regular patrons. Before going to sleep she built new fantasies of strolling past the club just in time to be rescued by them in some vague manner from an even vaguer peril.

But it never happened that way and other stratagems failed similarly. She tried to crash the club by pretending that she was meeting a date there and once succeeded in getting as far as the checkroom, where she had to put a name to the nonexistent date. A suave headwaiter consulted his list, assured her that the gentleman had no

reservation and escorted her back to the door with a manner that suggested it was an honor to be thrown out. She'd had one brief glimpse of the blond young man seated at a table, but that was a far cry from the gilded pick-up she had imagined.

Not that she strolled through the streets unnoticed and unwanted by the masculine part of the city. She drew considerable attention, ranging from piercing whistles to more direct overtures. From cab drivers, truck drivers, and sleek young men in sharp clothes to a few older men whose arteries strained to belie their age. Betty Jane concealed her pleasure and answered them all with a toss of her head. She still had money of her own, so she judged them all and found them wanting. It was true that her sense of discrimination was still primitive; she saw no difference between the Brothers Brooks and Richman and she defined the boundaries between rich and poor by the fishtails of Cadillacs, yet her instincts kept her always pointed toward the luxury frontiers she wanted to cross.

In the meantime she kept a careful check on the mentions of El Manzella in the gossip columns. These were many, for El Manzella was, according to three columnists who should know, the favorite bistro for the top level boys of the Syndicate as well as the Broadway and Hollywood crowds. Names like Costello, Brown, Adonis and Lance Peru were scattered like hard, bright gems through the columns. The names, or even the word Syndicate for that matter, meant nothing to Betty Jane. She saw in them glamour and excitement and wealth; that much she could pick up from the way the columnists mentioned them. More she didn't need to know. And among them she had seen a blond-headed boy, with wide shoulders and a rough handsome face, who rode in a yellow convertible.

Betty Jane had been a woman of the world just a week —seven days of eating in coffee houses, parading past the palaces that satisfied her definition of royalty, and going to bed with her dreams at the hotel. She still had no plan and felt no need for one. She already thought of herself as a woman of experience—she sustained the illusion with the memories of Johnny Raymond and Teddy Dillon—

and knew that it was only a matter of time before she came into her own.

The more she thought about it, the more it seemed to her that the success of her dreams depended on getting into El Manzella. Finally she hit on an idea. She called Steve Harper.

"Don't let your mother and father know who this is," she said when he answered. "It's Betty Jane."

"Yeah," he answered. It was impossible to tell whether he was still angry or not.

"Steve," she said, "I'm sorry about the fight we had. I was wrong. Only it's hard sometimes to admit it. I want to see you, Steve—but you mustn't tell anyone where I am."

He hesitated, but finally he said, "All right. Where and when?"

"Tomorrow night. Can you come into New York?"

"I guess so."

She was silent for a minute, thinking. She didn't want even Steve to know where she was staying or the name she was using. "I'll meet you," she said finally, and named a restaurant on Times Square. "At nine o'clock?"

"All right," he agreed.

She hung up and hugged herself in delight at having thought of this shrewd scheme.

The next evening she took special care with her dress and make-up before going to meet Steve. He was on time and seemed glad to see her.

"You look sharp," he said when she came up.

"Oh, Steve," she murmured softly. "I'm so glad to see you. I *am* sorry about that night. You were right. I'm never going to see Johnny Raymond again." She didn't bother to add that it was because she had graduated beyond Johnny.

"Okay," he said. He looked at her searchingly as if he weren't quite sure of her. "Now what's all this running away stuff?"

"I'll tell you later," she said. "Let's sit down a moment." When they were settled at a table, she burst out, "Steve, I want you to do something for me. Just for tonight. Then there won't be any more."

"You mean you'll come home and no more nonsense?"

She nodded, her eyes bright with thoughts of the future that was coming closer every moment.

"Okay," he said. "What is it?"

"I want you to take me to a night club," she said, "where they don't allow unescorted girls."

"A night club," he said. He looked uncomfortable. "I'd like to, Bett, but I don't have the money for that."

"I've got the money," she said. "We'll just go to the bar and have a couple of drinks. That's all. Honest, Steve."

"Where'd you get this money?" he asked.

She gave him a glance that held a mixture of mystery and resentment. "I've got it," she said. Her curiosity came rising back to the surface. "What are they saying in Lotus Park?"

"The whole town's buzzing," he said. "Nobody's talking about anything else."

She found it difficult to hide her pleasure. "What about my mother and father?" she asked.

"It's tough on them," he said soberly. "Your mother had hysterics and they had to call the doctor. My mother went over and helped take care of her. Your father doesn't say much, but I guess it's pretty tough on him."

"Sure," she jeered, "it's tough they haven't got anybody to push around. They should drop dead."

He shook his head unhappily. "I know what it was like for you," he said, "but this is really busting them up. I guess it wouldn't be easy, but you ought to come back, Bett. They need you—I'd like to have you back too."

She ignored his personal plea. "What are they doing about it?" she asked.

"What do you think?" he said. "Cops."

She grabbed his arm in excitement. "Have they found out anything, Steve? Have they?"

He glanced down at her. "As of today," he said with mock dignity, "the Nassau Police haven't seen fit to consult me."

She giggled, then looked disappointed.

"If it'll make you feel any better," he went on, "they grilled me. I didn't tell them a thing. I didn't know anything to tell them. They grilled Johnny Raymond, too. I guess they heard—the rumors about you and Johnny

and they gave him a rough time. He was in jail overnight." He sounded pleased.

"Serves him right," Betty Jane said with satisfaction.

"Latrine gossip has it," said Steve, "that the cops found someone who saw you getting on a New York train in Oceanside. But that's all they've got. You can bet, though, that they've notified the New York cops to be on the lookout for you."

"They won't find me," she said.

"Why did you do it, Bett?" he asked again.

"I'll tell you later," she said. "Take me to the night club first. Come on."

He paid for the coffee they had ordered and followed her out to the street.

They walked across town to El Manzella. The doorman recognized her and looked at them uncertainly but let them pass.

Inside, El Manzella looked like dozens of other small clubs. On their left as they entered was a checkroom presided over by a brassy blonde. To the right stood a bar in the shape of a half-circle. Straight ahead was the main room, white-covered tables mushrooming thickly over the floor. Hardly visible at the far end was a tiny clearing for the entertainers. Performers at El Manzella were said to need only enough space to wriggle their hips, that being the extent of their talents.

Just inside the door, Steve and Betty Jane saw the headwaiter hurrying to meet them. Long before he reached them he had remembered the girl and accurately judged the boy.

"Have you a reservation?" he asked. His tone indicated that he already knew they hadn't. It also intimated what his next remark would be.

"We're meeting some friends at the bar," Betty Jane said coolly and swept past the headwaiter to find a seat there. Steve Harper followed meekly. The maître d' shrugged and let them go.

Betty Jane called for a Tom Collins and after some hesitation Steve ordered the same. While the order was being filled, Betty Jane slipped him five dollars under the edge of the bar. He flushed, but took it, knowing he had no choice.

When the drinks were served, Betty Jane twisted

around to face Steve. Under the cover of drinking, she began carefully to search the room. The place was dimly lit, making it difficult to see the faces of the people at the far tables. She was beginning to think that her luck was still bad, when she saw him. He was seated at one of the tables near the bar, with the same swarthy little man she had seen him with before. She breathed a sigh of relief. Her first fear had been that he wouldn't be here; her second that he'd be accompanied by a girl.

She began talking to Steve Harper with great animation, rattling off all the things she'd seen during her week in New York and making up incidents that hadn't happened at all. Although she seemed to be giving all of her attention to Steve, she never lost sight of that one table. And before long her concentration was rewarded. His glance wandered over her idly, then came back for another, more careful look. Betty Jane's pulse quickened with excitement.

She soon discovered that a trip to the ladies' room would take her within a few feet of his table. She excused herself to Steve, and walked casually past without looking at the blond man, although she was well aware that she was being observed. She was conscious of the tight little movements of her hips and knew without looking back that he was conscious of them too. She stayed in the ladies' room a couple of minutes, then again swept past the table.

Back at the bar with Steve, she knew that the blond young man was looking at her frequently. Now that she knew his interest was aroused, she looked directly at him less often.

In the meantime, Steve was growing restless. He sensed that Betty Jane's attention was not as devoted as she pretended it to be; he had a vague feeling of being used and resented it. He began urging her to leave. She knew that somthing had to happen soon; if she left now, she might never get another chance.

Finally she went to the ladies' room again. Inside, she checked her make-up carefully. Then she arranged things in her purse. Outside she walked deliberately toward the table, ignoring the two men who sat there. As she drew level with them, she pulled her handkerchief from the purse. A package of cigarettes tumbled out with it and

fell to the floor. She pretended not to notice and quickened her step.

Back at the bar, she busied herself with her drink.

"Come on, Bett," Steve said. "Let's get out of here. This is no fun."

"As soon as I finish my drink," she murmured. Out of the corner of her eye, she had seen the blond young man bend over and pick up the cigarettes. A moment later he was on his way to the bar. She almost hugged herself in ecstasy.

Betty Jane pretended not to see him until he was standing beside her.

"Your cigarettes," he said, in a rather grating voice, and held them out to her. "You dropped them."

Betty Jane tried to look surprised. "Oh," she said, "thank you." She took the cigarettes, glancing up at him from beneath lowered lashes.

He grinned at her. "I'm Eddie Hamill," he said. "Don't I know you from some place?"

She looked at him as though trying to remember. There was something familiar about his name, she thought. Maybe she'd read it in one of the columns. It was exciting to think that he might be a celebrity.

"I don't think so," she said finally, but in a tone of regret.

"Then it's time we fixed it," he said. "What's your name, honey?"

"Betty Jane," she said. She hesitated and then indicated Steve. "This is my friend, Steve Harper, Mr. Hamill."

"Hi, kid," the blond said without looking around. "How about shaking your friend, Betty Jane, and coming over to my table?" He made no attempt to lower his voice so Steve wouldn't hear.

"Hey, wait a minute," Steve Harper interrupted. "Bett, you don't know this guy. You can't go getting mixed up with him."

"Let her speak for herself, kid," Eddie Hamill said quietly, and there was something ominous in his voice. "What about it, honey?"

"I don't know," she said slowly. "Maybe it would be fun—"

"No, you don't," Steve Harper said quickly. He

grabbed her hand. "Come on. We're getting out of here right now."

"Why?" she asked brightly. "Maybe I want to stay here. You run along, Steve. It is getting pretty late for a boy like you."

Steve stood up. His face was white and grim. "No," he said firmly. "I'm not going to let you."

"Who asked you?" Eddie Hamill said harshly. He'd swung to face Steve, his face settling into an emotionless mask. "The girl wants to be seen with some class. Go pick your mother some flowers."

"No," Steve said stubbornly.

"Okay, if you want to make it hard on yourself," Eddie said. He reached out and grabbed Steve by the shirt front. As he jerked him forward, his right fist chopped across the boy's nose. It was a vicious blow. He let go of the shirt and crossed his left to hit in the same spot. Steve Harper sprawled to the floor.

The boy rubbed his left hand across his face and stared at the streak of blood. Then he climbed to his feet. He was swinging his right fist before he was upright. It happened so quickly that it caught Eddie Hamill high on the cheek.

Hamill's face tightened and for a brief second his hand hovered near the lapel of his jacket. Then the fingers curled into a fist again and chopped down on Steve's nose. It staggered him and before he could straighten, Eddie drove another hard right to his jaw. Steve went down and this time Eddie followed through. The point of his shoe caught Steve in the side of the neck. Harper's body jerked convulsively, but this time he stayed down. Not completely out, but half-propped-up on his hands, unable to get up or fall completely.

The headwaiter and two other waiters came rushing up. For a moment Betty Jane was afraid she'd really started something, but they paid no attention to her or Hamill. They picked up Steve Harper and hustled him out through the front door.

"Come on, honey," Eddie Hamill said. "You're graduating to the big time."

She followed him back to the table. He introduced her to the other man, but she didn't hear the name because the small orchestra was playing loudly, still trying

to cover the brief fight. A moment later she was drinking her first glass of champagne.

Before they finally left the club, Betty Jane had discovered that the Cadillac convertible didn't belong to Eddie Hamill, but by that time it didn't seem to make any difference. He was carrying a large roll of bills and the champagne helped to make it look even larger.

That night she moved from her hotel to the one where Eddie Hamill was staying, several blocks away. And when she checked out of hers, she was careful to leave no forwarding address.

CHAPTER 7

Things had not worked out exactly as Betty Jane had imagined them, yet for the moment she was content with the results. She had crashed the night club and she had succeeded in meeting Eddie Hamill, although not exactly in the fashion of her dreams. She could hardly think of Steve Harper as a menace from which she had been rescued. Reality, however, had proved in other respects the equal of her wishful thinking. The brief beating of Steve had given her a sense of exhilaration. It had been an exhibition of unleashed, ruthless power that fitted in with her own driving ambition. Afterward she felt a moment's regret about Steve, but she wasted little time indulging herself in pity for him.

There was no Cadillac as she had expected. On the other hand, Eddie Hamill had what seemed to her plenty of money. Their meeting had not been as romantic as she had anticipated, but this was no loss, for she found his unmasked hardness more than a compensation. That first night in his hotel room he removed his coat to reveal a shoulder holster and a snub-nosed .38.

Betty Jane stared at it and fear made her weak.

"What's that?" she asked.

"What?" he asked. He looked at her and saw the direction of her gaze. He grinned as he pulled the gun from the holster and spun the cylinder. "That's my best friend. If anyone gets out of line, my friend talks to them and then everything's okay."

Betty Jane's mind shied away from the real explanation of the gun. Until that moment she had thought of Eddie as a young man with money, without giving any thought to where the money came from. His possession of a weapon, if she accepted its reality, suggested a more complete explanation. Part of it was acceptable to her, but part of it was not. Like many of her elders, she had a mixed picture of people who carried guns. The pieces that made up the picture came from various sources: from columnists and sensational newspaper stories which often emphasized only the glamorous aspects of successful criminals; from the make-believe land of movies and television where Little Caesar never quite shook off the gilt of Edward G. Robinson; from the more serious newspaper stories where the use of guns was finally equated with sudden death and the defeated gangster, stripped of his glamour, straining against the straps of the electric chair. Guns meant murder—but murder was not something very real. It belonged with the other fantasies, adjustable by the use of imagination.

Betty Jane's conflict lasted only a minute before she retained what was palatable and threw out the rest. It was made easy for her. There is a big difference between a man waving a gun in the grip of a ruthless emotion and one who idly displays his gun while his mind is on a matter where no weapon is needed. Too, Betty Jane was not far from the era when boys and girls had waved fancier and more realistic-looking guns in each other's faces daily.

She giggled and fell back into the embrace of the champagne. "Bang, bang," she said.

Eddie Hamill laughed and tossed the gun on the dresser.

One of the first things Betty Jane discovered was that she had almost unlimited power over Eddie—in certain areas.

"Baby, you really do things to me," he would mutter, as he embraced her. And when she experimentally drew away from him, she saw that it left him trembling helplessly. Men really were funny, she thought. The way you could handle them once you knew how. It made her laugh inside to see a tough guy like Eddie reduced to such quivering helplessness. But, at the same time, she

was smart enough to realize she must never laugh at him openly if she wanted to retain this power over him.

"Don't ever hold out on me, honey," he whispered once. "I don't know what I'd do."

"Well, what *would* you do?" she asked. Probably crawl, she told herself silently.

"Just don't try it," he threatened. "Now come here."

Betty Jane smiled wisely and slipped back into his arms. "You'd do almost anything to have me, wouldn't you?"

"Ah, now you're talking like all the other dames," he growled, but she knew it was true. It gave her a wonderful feeling of power—something to call on in case she ever really, desperately, needed it.

The Reddle Hotel, where Eddie lived, was little different from the one in which Betty Jane had been staying, but for a few days she saw it as an improvement. Eddie spent his money freely and it was fun helping him. They slept until noon every day. Afternoons they usually went to a movie. In the evening to a club, usually El Manzella. Sometimes there would be a party with two or three friends of Eddie's and their girls. But there were plenty of evenings when Eddie left her alone in the hotel with nothing to do but read the gossip columns and movie fan magazines. Some of the nights he didn't return until almost morning.

In the beginning Betty Jane was satisfied simply with knowing that Eddie had money and was willing to spend it, but it soon began to seem a smaller amount than it had at first. She saw how the other girls dressed and looked and it gave her ideas. She discovered the magic of beauty parlors and her hair suddenly became several shades lighter. She grew to scorn the cheaper dress shops and her tastes became more expensive if not necessarily better. Then there were times when Eddie refused her money or told her that she would have to wait a few days. With the first signs that the well was not bottomless, she began to wonder about the source of his income.

At first Eddie refused to tell her anything about where he got his money or how he spent the nights when he was away from her, but it was an unequal contest. There came a night when Eddie threw his arm around her only to find her unresponsive.

"What's the matter, baby?" he asked.

"I'm just not interested," she said coolly. She went over to the dressing table, she turned on the small light and began combing her hair. The light threw a soft glow over her body.

"What do you mean?" he demanded belligerently.

"I thought I made it clear," she said. She twisted sideways and lifted her arms to brush her hair. She glanced in the mirror and was pleased at the reflection of her firm, beautifully molded figure. "You don't think you can go out three or four nights a week to see another girl and then just come around to me whenever you feel like it."

"Hey, you got me all wrong, baby," he said in injured tones. "I've told you it's business when I have to stay away like that."

"Sure, you told me." She smiled at herself in the mirror. "But you also told me you can't tell me anything about the business. So I can figure it out for myself."

"But I can't tell you . . ."

"Sure. *She* wouldn't like it."

"There are no dames in this," he said. "You know how I feel about you."

She laughed to herself and ignored him. There followed a long silence broken only by the soft brushing of her hair and finally the scratching of a match as he lit a cigarette.

"Look," he said, "if I tell you about it will you keep your mouth shut?"

"Who would I tell anything to? I don't see anybody but you."

"Yeah. That's right. Well, maybe . . ."

She waited, still brushing her hair, showing no more interest than she had before.

"Okay," he said. Now that he had made up his mind he seemed eager to tell her. "You ever hear of the Syndicate, honey?"

"You're going to tell me you work for a big company?" she asked. "With the hours you keep?"

He grinned. "It's a big company, all right. You ever hear of Tommy Blue Eyes?"

"What kind of a name is that?"

"His real name is Tomaso Giulano, but everybody calls him Tommy Blue Eyes. Even the Broadway column-

ists. The Syndicate is the outfit that looks after all the rackets. All the big shots all over the country are in it. Then there are six very big guys who run the Syndicate. I never saw any of them but Tommy Blue Eyes. Right now one of them is over in Italy and can't get back and two of them are doing short stretches up the river. Tommy Blue Eyes passes along the orders for all of them."

"But what do they do?" she asked.

"I told you," he said. "They look after all the rackets and keep things in line. Suppose maybe some loan shark or a snow peddler decides he ain't satisfied with his territory or that he don't want to cut in the Syndicate any more. Tommy Blue Eyes sends out the word and the guy gets straightened out. Or maybe some guy double-crosses a gang and they want to hit him. They take the beef to Tommy Blue Eyes and somebody is sent to rub the guy out. Or maybe a couple of gangs get mad at each other and want to shoot it out. That kind of stuff is bad for business, so the Syndicate makes them smooth it out some other way. . . . I work for the Syndicate." He made the announcement with pride.

"Doing what?" she asked.

"I'm a kind of a fixer. When some guy has to be told to stay in line, me and Lew Monelli go out and tell him."

"Which one's Lew Monelli?" she asked.

"You know Lew," he said in surprise. "The little guy. With the Cadillac. He's a great guy."

"Why don't you have a Cadillac?" she wanted to know.

"I don't make enough money for a buggy like that yet."

"Why does Lew? You both do the same work."

"Wait a minute, baby," he said patiently. "Lew's been with the Syndicate a long time. I was up the river myself for a stretch. I just got out on parole about three months ago. That's when I started with the Syndicate."

"How much do they pay you?"

"Two hundred bucks a week," he said proudly.

Not long ago this would have seemed like a fortune to Betty Jane; now it suddenly seemed like a pittance. "How often do you see this Tommy Blue Eyes?" she asked.

"Not often," Eddie admitted. He'd been hoping she'd accept the implication that he was more important than

he was. "Usually we get our orders from Lance Peru. He's Tommy's right-hand man."

Betty Jane had put the brush back on the dressing table and forgotten all about her hair. "Well, the next time you see him you tell him that you've got to have more money."

"I can't do that, honey," he said. "I'll get more when I've been around longer. Besides it might not be long before we'll be rolling in the money. Tommy's already said I can start a racket of my own as long as it doesn't cut into anybody's territory. I'm just waiting until I figure out something good. Now, cut out the yaking and come back to bed."

"Okay," she said agreeably. She turned out the light and rejoined him, but she continued to think about what he'd said—her thoughts undisturbed by Eddie's demands.

In the days that followed Betty Jane continued to ponder this talk with Eddie. She didn't bring the subject up again and Eddie seemed perfectly content with the status quo. He continued to do the minor fixing for Tommy Blue Eyes and Lance Peru and to draw his two hundred a week. To Eddie Hamill, still only a few months out of the big gray prison up the Hudson, two hundred bucks a week and a girl like Betty Jane were almost as much paradise as a man could expect. If he worried about anything it was the speed with which Betty Jane could make his money vanish.

Whenever Eddie was out, Betty Jane usually took her magazine down to the hotel lobby and read there. After a time she began to notice a number of girls who came in and out of the hotel, yet didn't live there. Not always the same girls, although there was a sameness about them. She also began to notice the men who came in, handed money to either the desk clerk or the bellhop and then disappeared upstairs with one of the girls. Once she was aware of this much, she watched more closely and soon found out that they generally reappeared in the lobby within a half-hour or so. Then one day the bellhop approached her as she sat idly turning the pages of her magazine.

"How would you like to make a little extra cash?" he asked.

"How?" she wanted to know.

"You know, being nice to a guy upstairs." There was a knowing look on his face. "There's a guy just come in and none of the regular girls are around."

Betty Jane wanted to know more about it, but she also wanted to put the bellhop in his place. "I'm Eddie Hamill's wife," she said.

"Sure, I know. But he leaves you alone a lot. You might as well make a little dough with your spare time. A lot of the girls who work here are married. Of course, they only work part time."

"How does it work?" she asked.

"The guy pays four bucks for the room, then he usually gives the girl ten bucks." He looked her over. "You look pretty young, maybe we could get more in your case. A lot of older guys go for young chicks. And they'll cough it up for a real young one. You know, I've been watching you. You're alone enough every day, I'll bet you could turn five or ten tricks without anybody being the wiser."

Only one part of the proposition interested her. "How much more?" she asked.

"Maybe fifteen or even twenty bucks. Of course you turn half of it back to us."

"Why?"

"Because we set it up for you. Then we furnish the room."

"The guy pays for that," Betty Jane pointed out.

"That's the way it is," the bellhop said flatly. "What do you say?"

Betty Jane's formal education had terminated abruptly, but her thinking hadn't. For a moment she toyed with the idea the bellhop presented, but she was stopped not by fear of Eddie, but by the thought that the bellhop would be making more money than she would.

"No," she said, turning back to her magazine.

"Okay, but let me know if you change your mind," the bellhop said. "It's easy money."

Betty Jane thought about the bellhop's proposition several times during the afternoon. That night after dinner, when she suggested that they go to El Manzella, Eddie confessed that he was almost broke. He'd gotten into a crap game that afternoon and had thrown nothing

but threes and twelves. Betty Jane said nothing more until they were back in their room.

"Eddie," she said, "didn't they tell you that you could start something of your own even while you're still doing jobs for the Syndicate?"

"Yeah," Eddie said. "As long as it doesn't cut in on somebody else's territory. But that's the tough part, baby. I had some idea of maybe starting a horse room, but there's one in almost every block. And they're all kicking in to the Syndicate. It's tough."

"Do you know what goes on here in the hotel?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"The girls who take men upstairs."

"Oh, that." Eddie laughed. "Sure, I know about them, honey. This is part of a farm."

"Farm?"

"Yeah. There ain't many houses any more. Most of the stuff works through hotels like this. A guy will have a whole string of dames and he farms them around from one hotel to another. That way the girls don't keep working one place so that the customers get tired of them. That's why it's called a farm."

"One of the bellhops wanted me to go to work this afternoon," Betty Jane said.

"I'll slug the bastard," Eddie said grimly. "Which one was it?"

She laughed. "I told him no," she said. She saw the satisfied expression on his face and decided to wipe it off. "I might have taken him up, but I didn't like the idea of him getting more money than I would."

"Honey, don't talk like that," Eddie pleaded. "Hustling's okay for some dames. But you're my woman and I don't like you talking like that, even if it's only joking."

"Who said I was your woman?" Betty Jane demanded provocatively.

"I did," Eddie said. He pulled her to him. His left hand twined in her hair, forcing her head back as he bent to kiss her. Then, as Betty Jane felt him tense with desire, she broke away to slip out of her dress, laughing softly as she watched his face.

Later, when he had lit a cigarette, she whispered archly, "Eddie, do you think I'm beautiful?"

"The most beautiful," he said.

"Am I dreamy?" she asked with a twisted smile. It was the first time she'd used that word in weeks.

He laughed. "Yeah," he said. He reached over and slapped her lightly.

"The bellhop said that there's a lot of old guys who'll pay more for a young girl like me. You think anybody would pay me twenty-five or thirty dollars?" She had already thought of a much higher figure herself, but she wanted to see what he'd say.

"A lot of them would pay fifty to a hundred, maybe sometimes more," he said. "But I don't like it when you talk like that. Cut it out."

"Okay," she said. She stretched sensuously on the bed. "Eddie, if I give you the idea of how to make a lot of money and help you do it, do I get half?"

"Sure, honey. Only if it's got anything to do with you hustling, it's out."

"Not me. I've been thinking about this business of old guys paying more for young girls. I'll bet you I could round up a whole bunch of girls who'd work for us in their spare time. And you know what? They'd think it was a big deal if we gave them one or two bucks every time. The rest would be ours."

"Say, maybe that is an idea," Eddie said, sitting up in bed. He thought a minute, then shook his head. "No, if we tried to work it from here we'd be interfering with the farm. They wouldn't like that."

"We wouldn't have to work it from here," Betty Jane said scornfully. "What makes you think you have to live in this crummy hotel? We could get an apartment. One with maybe a couple of extra rooms so we'd be prepared if we needed it. But most of the time we wouldn't need space. If an old guy wants a young girl badly enough to pay fifty or a hundred dollars for her, then he'd be willing to find a place to take her. We'd just work the phones and arrange for them to meet. If he couldn't find a place to take her, then he could come to our apartment. It wouldn't be cutting into anybody's territory."

"Maybe it'd work at that," Eddie said.

"Sure it would," Betty Jane said. "The girls could work in the afternoons and on Saturdays and maybe even Sundays. I'll bet I could get fifty girls to work for us."

"You mean we'd work it something like a call house," Eddie said.

"They have them already?" Betty Jane said. She wrinkled up her face. "I thought I just dreamed it up."

Eddie laughed. "Don't worry, honey. I think maybe we could work it that way. Maybe I ought to talk to Lance Peru about it tomorrow."

"Why?" she asked. She sat up on the bed and hugged her knees in excitement. "It wouldn't have anything to do with them. This could be just our own. No reason why we should cut anybody in on it. You could find the men who'd like young girls, couldn't you?"

"I guess I could," Eddie said doubtfully. "I could find out how the other boys do it."

"I'll bet we could make thousands of dollars," Betty Jane said excitedly.

"Probably," he said, beginning to catch some of her excitement. He liked the idea of making a lot of money on his own. He liked it enough to give up the thought of asking the Syndicate for permission. After all, he reminded himself, Tommy Blue Eyes and Lance Peru had both advised him to get into something for himself. "Okay, we'll do it, honey," he said.

"I'll start looking for girls tomorrow," Betty Jane said. There was an abandoned quality to her laughter as she turned and kissed him.

CHAPTER 8

Once the decision was made, Betty Jane wasted very little time. Early the following morning she went to work on her plan. Her first step was to discover the candy store and lunch counter that was the girls' favorite hangout of the moment. Most of the week was spent merely in getting on a friendly basis with a few likely prospects. She had an instinct for locating the girls who were not too different from herself—those who were dissatisfied and filled with hostility against their homes or their neighborhood. After that, she discovered, it was not too difficult to broach the subject. At the end of the week she had five girls who were willing. She suspected there were

others who might be recruited, but she eliminated many of them. The five she chose were well developed physically and pretty in a sullen fashion.

After another three weeks she had fifteen girls. They each agreed to accept twenty-five dollars a week regardless of how often they were called. The hours they could be available were carefully charted by Betty Jane. Some of them were also free at night and it was arranged for Betty Jane to represent herself as a baby-sitting service so that they could easily get out of their homes.

It took her another couple of weeks to find the right apartment, on the West Side not too far from midtown Broadway. It was a pleasant five rooms on the ground floor of an old brownstone. The advance rent and the need for a few extras quickly devoured Eddie's ready money and demanded more. Under Betty Jane's prodding, he finally got the rest from a loan shark. They had cards printed with their phone number on it and Eddie started putting them in circulation through cab drivers and headwaiters.

It turned out better than Betty Jane had imagined in her wildest enthusiasm. Within a few months they were collecting up to five thousand dollars a week. Out of this came the expense of twenty-five dollars to each of the fifteen girls and about a thousand dollars which had to be split among those who sent customers. That still left them a thirty-five hundred weekly profit.

Betty Jane stayed in the apartment, taking all the phone calls and making the arrangements. Eddie usually collected the money, but occasionally they had the customer give the money to the headwaiter or hackie who had recommended him. This they did with the few they were sure they could trust. They were careful to see that none of the money was ever turned directly over to the girls.

With all the work, Betty Jane found time to devote to her own improvement. Having no values of her own, she had the sense to pick her values from those who best survived in the world she was struggling to enter. She observed other women—those who succeeded in appearing secure—and learned from them. The shade of her hair became less brassy, its lines more sophisticated. She found her way to the better, as well as more expensive, dress

shops. Slowly she was shedding the cocoon of adolescence, taking on the sheen of one kind of maturity.

But none of these things seemed to feed the bottomless maw of the ambition that drove her. Although she was not consciously aware of it, she was more restless than ever. The money wasn't enough, the satisfaction of the things she bought was short-lived. She found herself in a constant state of irritation over Eddie's lack of ambition.

She very seldom consciously thought of Lotus Park or her parents these days, yet they were never far from her thoughts. Often she would be walking along the street and see a man who momentarily reminded her of her father and she would return to the apartment in a rage. She understood none of this, yet it was one of the causes of her dissatisfaction.

Then one day it came to a sharp focus. The phone rang and she answered it.

"Hello," said a man's voice. It was slightly thickened by drink, but there seemed to be something familiar about it. "Mrs. Chalice?" That was the name on their cards.

"Yes," she said, using the somewhat disguised voice that she had acquired for professional purposes.

"Salvadore at the Celestial Club gave me your number," he said. "He said you could find some girls for three lonely boys. Nice young girls, he said."

"I think something could be arranged," she said. "Three girls?"

"Yep. Three little girls for three little boys."

"Where would you like them to meet you?"

"We're here at the club right now. Maybe in about an hour we'll have dinner and it would be nice to have them join us."

"All right," she said. "They'll be there within the hour. You understand that these girls can't be kept out all night?"

"Sure. Just a little dinner and a little fun. You know."

"You understand all the arrangements?"

"Sure. Salvadore told us. A hundred bucks each. Don't worry. It's on the little old expense account. My two friends are from out of town and nothing's too good for them."

"You'll give the money to Salvadore in advance," Betty Jane said. "Who should the girls ask for?"

"Just tell them to ask for Bob Allen. Good-Time Bobbie."

So that was why the voice had sounded familiar! There was a moment of silence while her hand gripped the receiver in a spasm of rage. She knew she was angry without knowing why and she struggled to master it.

"All right," she said crisply. "They'll be there."

She replaced the receiver and sat there, her nails tapping a nervous stacatto on the dial. Then, slowly, an idea came to her and she grinned mirthlessly.

She called three of her girls who could get out on the pretense of baby-sitting. She told them the set-up. She gave more specific instructions to the youngest of the three.

Next she called Salvadore at the Celestial Club. She made arrangements with him to have the club photographer get several shots of the group after the girls arrived.

That night she was irritable and nervous. By the time Eddie arrived home she was half-drunk. But she didn't tell him any of the things that were on her mind, if indeed she admitted them to herself.

The following day she went down to the Celestial Club as soon as she knew Salvadore would be on duty. It was the middle of the afternoon. The pictures were ready for her and she took them. She didn't look at them until she was away from the club.

They were all good clear pictures, several of them showing her father looking intimately at the girl beside him. As she stared at them her mouth went dry with hatred.

She had no clear idea of why she had wanted the pictures or what she would do with them. She cast around in her mind and finally went into the nearest bank, where she rented a safe deposit box, paying the rental for a year in advance. She locked the pictures in it.

She returned to the apartment and on a sudden impulse picked up the phone and dialed the number of Karen Frocks. She asked for her father. When he answered, she could tell he had a hangover.

"This is Betty Jane," she said in her normal voice.

"Where the hell are you?" he shouted. "I'll teach you to run away from home and upset your mother the way you have."

"I'm sure you will, Daddy," she said sweetly. "*When* you get your hands on me."

"Where are you?"

"Not far," she said. "Daddy dear, I thought you'd like to know that I'm working and making a lot of money."

His anger was one-tracked. "Where are you?" he demanded.

"Professionally," she said, "I'm known as Mrs. Chalice."

There was a choked silence at the other end of the line.

"I hope you liked the girls I sent you last night," she said. "Did you like Nita? I told her to pay special attention to you. Was she nice, Daddy?"

There was a gurgle in the earpiece and then the sound of the receiver crashed on the hook, followed by the hum of an open wire. Betty Jane hung up and laughed shrilly.

For several days Betty Jane found her mind wasn't on business. She felt distracted and couldn't stop thinking about her father. Finally, one evening, she telephoned Steve Harper. It was the first time she'd called him since that night at the club.

"What do you want?" he asked. He still sounded angry.

"I'm sorry about that night at the club," she said. "I really am, Steve."

"Okay. So what do you want?" His voice remained hostile and distant.

"I thought you loved me," she said.

There was a long silence. "I do," he said finally, "but I'm through acting like a square just to hand you laughs."

"Steve," she said pleadingly.

"What do you want?" he repeated, but she thought his voice sounded softer.

"How's my mother and father?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"Your father's very sick," he said.

"Yeah? With what?"

"He had a heart attack at his office four days ago. The doctor thinks he'll pull through, but he's been pretty sick."

"What caused it?" she asked and waited with her heart pounding wildly.

"I don't know," Steve said. "I heard Dad and Mom talking. The doctor said he must've had a shock, but he won't answer any questions. They think it may have had something to do with a phone call. They found him slumped over his desk just after somebody called him. . . . You ought to go home, Bett."

"If he's going to get over it," Betty Jane said, "there's no point to me coming. I'll see you around, Steve." She hung up quickly before he could say anything.

For several minutes she sat quietly beside the phone, a tight grin stretching her face into a grimace. Finally she was brought out of her reverie by the ringing of the phone.

"Son of a bitch," she muttered as she reached for it.

It was a customer and she turned swiftly to filling his order. Once more she was working as she had in the beginning, getting a strong sense of pleasure from each call, as though she could hear the ringing of the cash register.

The money continued to roll in and Eddie and Betty Jane continued to spend it almost as fast as it came. Sometimes even faster, for Eddie had developed a strong taste for dice and horses, without having uncovered any ability in either field. Since none of the girls could stay out late without arousing the suspicion of their parents, they were usually through with business by ten or eleven every night. Then they started their rounds of night clubs.

In terms of material things, Betty Jane was leading the life she'd always wanted, but now that she had it somehow it didn't seem enough. She no longer knew exactly what she wanted, only that it was something more than what she had. The things that had once seemed so exciting began to pall. There was no thrill in going through the same routine every day. Although she managed to conceal her growing dislike, she found Eddie wanting in more and more ways.

During this period her fantasies returned, taking up more and more of her waking time. These included wild flights of fancy in which Eddie was either arrested or killed by the cops. And there was one, which came back

again and again, in which Eddie and her father fought a duel with guns. Sometimes her father won and sometimes it was Eddie; in other improvisations, they were both killed.

And the dream came back almost every night. It was the old dream that had haunted her in Lotus Park, but there were a few changes in it. . . .

She was walking down a stairway. The steps were high and the banister to which she clung was shaky. With each step the boards creaked and the whole stair seemed to sway. She could feel the fear creeping up through her legs to take possession of her body. She gripped the banister even tighter. Knowing that she must not fall. Knowing that she would. She tried to turn back up the stairway but couldn't—fought against the reality of the dream but sleep clutched her too tightly. . . . Then she fell. There was a wild moment of feeling her body tilt, of stepping where there was no step, then she was rolling over and over down the endless stairs.

She was almost to the bottom when she saw them. Her mother and father. And around them other figures, their faces hidden in the shadows. They were all arguing, their lips moving soundlessly and their faces clenched with anger. She cried out for them to stop her fall but they neither heard nor saw her. Their faces writhed in mutual hatred while she fell and fell—finally crashing at their feet. Then they all looked down at her, their eyes vacant.

"Shhh," said her mother. Suddenly there was a microphone in front of her and her voice boomed until the walls shook. "It's Betty Jane. She's no good. No good."

The others crowded around the microphone. "Whore, whore," her father shouted.

"My girl," Steve Harper said. "I'll have her."

"My girl," Johnny Raymond said. "I had her."

"My girl," Eddie Hamill said. "I've got her."

"I'm your father's best friend," Teddy Dillon said piously. He was waving a handful of dresses over his head and Betty Jane was suddenly aware that she had nothing on. "Your father's best friend. Best friend."

"Whore, whore," her father chanted.

And suddenly she saw, towering above them all, the

giant figure of a naked man, with no face, who shouted obscenities at them. . . .

Then she would awaken, her body in a tight knot and the sheet clammy with sweat. She would move as far away from the snoring Eddie as she could. She would roll over on her stomach, pushing her hand down between the sheet and her body, and rub her face against the pillow in the old magic gesture. Then after a while she would drift fearfully back into sleep.

It was four months since she and Eddie had started their business, six months since she had left home, and Betty Jane yearned for new worlds to conquer. These were already moving into her orbit.

So far they'd had no trouble at all. Then, suddenly, one of their girls was arrested in a hotel room with a man. The girl called from jail. She was in tears. She had given a phony name, but she was still terrified her parents would find out. Betty Jane soothed her and assured her that everything would be all right. Then she hung up and turned to Eddie.

"What do we do, Eddie?" she asked. "We've got to get her out of there quick. She's scared and she's liable to really squeal if we don't."

"It ought to be easy," Eddie said, but his nervousness showed he didn't really believe it. "We'd better get her a mouthpiece, but I think all we have to do is bail her out and then let her not show up. Maybe I ought to call somebody and ask about it."

He looked at the phone, but made no move to pick it up. He was suddenly remembering something he had pushed out of his mind for the past four months. He had suspected that he ought to check with the Syndicate before going into anything on his own, but he had let Betty Jane talk him out of it. Now that he wanted their advice, he was suddenly sure that he'd made a mistake. Eddie Hamill said he was never afraid of anything, but just the same he was now afraid.

While he struggled with his indecision, the door buzzer sounded. He looked at Betty Jane. "You sure she didn't name us?" he asked. "That might be the cops."

"She said she didn't," Betty Jane said. "So what if it is the cops? They got nothing on us." She was not as

calm as her voice sounded for she suddenly remembered that the police were looking for her. "See who it is."

Eddie went to the door and opened it cautiously. Then he threw it wide open with a sigh of relief.

"Hi, Lance," he said. "Come on in."

The man who stepped into the apartment was big and handsome, with curly black hair. He wore a three-hundred-dollar suit with the air of never having known anything else; and it would have taken an expert to observe that the left side of the coat had been made just enough larger to accommodate a holster. He was the perfect picture of the prosperous young businessman, except for one thing: his face was so devoid of expression as to be almost a mask. Only the black eyes were alert and alive.

"Hi, Eddie," he said. His voice was as empty of emphasis as his face. His gaze traveled around the room and stopped when it came to Betty Jane. Something like approval came into his dark, intense eyes.

Eddie Hamill closed the door and turned around in time to see the other man's gaze fixed on Betty Jane.

"Hey, that's right," he said. "You don't know my girl, do you? This is Betty Jane. Honey, this is Lance Peru. You've heard me talk about him."

"Hello, Lance," Betty Jane said. Automatically, her voice had become huskier. She liked the looks of this man. She also knew from the things that Eddie had told her that he was someone important in the Syndicate. That made him still more exciting.

"Some babe," Lance Peru said. He recognized the look in Betty Jane's eyes. It was as if he and Betty Jane had already come to an understanding; and only Eddie was left in the dark about it. "How long has she been your girl, Eddie?"

"Four, five months. I guess I'm pretty lucky."

"Yeah," Lance Peru said. "You *have* been." The emphasis on the past tense was barely noticeable.

"What?" Eddie asked.

Lance ignored the question. He lit a cigarette and stared at Eddie. "Haven't seen you around in the last week, Eddie. How come?"

"You know how it is," Eddie said. "I've been pretty

busy and I figured you'd get in touch with me if you needed me."

"Sure," Lance said. "What have you been busy at, Eddie?"

Eddie Hamill was getting nervous. "Well, Tommy Blue Eyes said I ought to get into something, so Betty Jane and me have had a few girls hustling."

"I heard you were running a call business," Lance said. "How's it going?"

Eddie had been trying to weigh every tone in Peru's voice, but he still hadn't heard anything threatening. He relaxed. "Five grand a week before expenses," he said proudly. "And that's only the beginning. It was Betty Jane's idea."

Lance Peru looked at Betty Jane again. This time his gaze was more appraising. Finally he turned back to Eddie. "But you went along with it?"

"Sure. I know a good thing when I see it. It's a gold mine. We got fifteen girls. Fifty bucks is our rock bottom price."

"I hear one of your girls was arrested today," Lance said.

Eddie Hamill looked at Betty Jane in surprise, but she was paying no attention to him. She was watching Lance Peru, her every sense alert.

"How'd you hear that?" Eddie asked. "We just heard about it ourselves a few minutes ago."

"You know how it is," Lance said. "The guy who made the pinch called us up beforehand. He wanted to know if he was stepping on our toes. I told him no, so he nabbed the girl."

"Why didn't you contact me?" Eddie asked, aggrieved. "I was just about to call Tommy and ask how to get her out of it. If you know the cop who pinched her, it should be easy to square it."

"We could get her out. As a matter of fact, the charge is still on the squeal book at the precinct. We could square it with a phone call."

"That's swell," Eddie said, a little too eagerly.

"I said we *could*," Lance said, and a hardness crept into his voice. "You made a little mistake, Eddie. Right in the beginning you should have discussed this with me or Tommy. You should have started kicking in twenty-

five per cent of the take to the Syndicate and we would have seen that this didn't happen at all."

"Twenty-five per cent?" Eddie said.

"Yeah. Now you've been operating for four months and doing five grand a week. That's twenty grand you owe us. You want to slip me the twenty notes right now, I'll make the phone call and the girl will be free."

"But—but I don't have twenty grand," Eddie said. He frowned. "Sure, I can see where maybe we have to pay for protection and I guess I should've taken it up with Tommy, but that's a lot of dough."

"You see, Eddie," Betty Jane said suddenly, knowing now what her pitch had to be. "I told you we ought to fix it up with the Syndicate when we started. I told you that you couldn't get away with cutting them out. But you thought you knew better." She smiled at Lance Peru.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Eddie demanded.

Lance Peru grinned and stepped across to him. He slipped his hand inside Eddie's coat and came out with the gun. He tossed it into a chair across the room.

"What's the idea?" Eddie wanted to know.

"This," Lance said pleasantly. His left hand grasped Eddie's tie and twisted. Then with his open right hand he slapped Eddie across the face. Several times. Palm of the hand on one side of his face, back-hand on the other. He struck hard so that there were white finger marks after each blow. Then he let go of the tie, stepped back and drove a hard right into Eddie's face. Eddie backpedaled rapidly, then sprawled on the floor. He was up, almost immediately, on one knee. He hesitated there, looking steadily at Lance Peru. His eyes flickered for a second in the direction of the chair.

"Go ahead," Lance said softly. "Go for the gun if you've got the guts."

There was hatred on Eddie Hamill's face. He glanced at the chair where the gun lay, then back at Lance. He seemed to weigh the chances. Despite the odds, it seemed that he was going to make the effort. But he stayed there on the floor, his shoulders and back rigid with tension, the gaze of hatred clawing at Lance Peru's face.

Betty Jane was leaning forward on the edge of her chair, her heart thudding, her body so tense with excite-

ment it ached. But nothing happened. Eddie stayed where he was.

"You're a punk," Lance Peru said. "A cheap punk who'll never smarten up. Keep out of my way or I'll fix you for keeps." He started to walk toward the door.

Betty Jane watched him, wondering how to say what she had been thinking for several minutes. She was saved the necessity. At the door, Lance Peru turned to look at her.

"Want to come along?" he asked casually.

"Sure," she said in the same casual tone. She stood and smoothed down her dress. Then she went to the closet and pulled out the mink jacket she had bought the second week they were in business.

"Want to take the rest of your stuff?" Lance asked.

She considered swiftly and decided to make a gesture. Glancing at Lance Peru, she thought she could afford it. "This cheap stuff?" she said. "Leave it. I'm sure I can do better where I'm going," she added boldly.

Lance Peru laughed and held open the door for her.

She and Lance walked out of the apartment, leaving Eddie Hamill still crouched on the floor, his look of hatred now mingled with shocked amazement.

As they reached the street, Betty Jane turned to Lance. "I did start the business," she said. "It was my idea and I got the girls. There's no reason why Eddie should have any part of it. I want to keep it for myself. I'll turn in twenty-five per cent to the Syndicate."

"Are you coming with me?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I don't care if you go on with the business, but if you're moving in with me I won't like the idea of your being too busy to see me."

"I'll be around when you want me," she said.

"Okay," he said. He grinned. "But Eddie may not like it."

"Eddie," she said as if the name were a curse. She suddenly caught sight of a pretty, dark-haired girl approaching them. She laughed. "I know how to handle Eddie."

"How?" he asked curiously.

"You'll see." She raised her voice and caught the girl's attention. "Stella."

The girl saw her and stopped. "Hi, Betty Jane," she

said. She glanced at the man. "I was coming to talk to you."

"Save it for later," Betty Jane said. "Stella, I want you to go into the apartment. You've got your own key. Eddie's there and he needs consoling. Agree with everything he says. Make love to him, or anything. But keep him in the apartment until I call you."

"Okay," the girl said. She turned and headed for the apartment.

"What was that about?" Lance Peru said.

"You'll see," Betty Jane said with satisfaction. "I want to stop in the drugstore on the corner."

A few minutes later Betty Jane emerged from a phone booth, a smug look on her face.

"Okay, spill it," Lance said as he hailed a cab.

"That girl was Stella Hobbs," Betty Jane said. "One of my girls. She's fourteen years old. Eddie Hamill is still on parole. I just called the parole office. They'll come up and find Eddie with Stella. That's the end of any trouble from him."

Lance Peru laughed as he helped her into the cab. "Baby," he said, "you and I are going to get along fine. You're my kind of woman."

"I hope so," Betty Jane said demurely.

CHAPTER 9

Again Betty Jane moved, this time to an apartment on Park Avenue, where she was known as Mrs. Peru. She was instinctively aware of the difference in her environment and within a week subtle changes were noticeable in her clothes and her hair style. Betty Jane Chalice was always quick to make the surface adaptations.

At Lance's insistence, she permitted the business to be turned over to others in the organization, but every week she received a share of the profits. In addition to her income from that, Lance gave her whatever money she wanted.

Only one thing did he refuse her. Betty Jane wanted a big red convertible, but Lance finally convinced her that she'd be safer to stick to taxis. He had learned that there

was a five-state alarm out for Betty Jane and it was because of this that he finally got her to agree. She was never able to tell him, nor even to articulate to herself the real reason she wanted it—but since leaving home her fantasies had included the picture of driving into Lotus Park in the big red convertible. Sometimes she sat on her bed, hugging her knees in secret delight, as she imagined the expressions on the faces of her mother and father as she told them how she had earned it. Or the expressions on the faces of the neighbors as she whipped along Barnum Boulevard.

Lance was gone most of the afternoon and a large part of every night. There were always a few nights every week when he didn't return to their apartment at all. But when he did see her, he showered her with the symbols of power that she craved. When they were night-clubbing or to a restaurant, it was always to the largest and most expensive in the city. Frequently they would be in a party which was joined by celebrities of Broadway and Hollywood. Once—ecstasy of ecstasies— she was mentioned in a prominent column, not by name but as the "blonde companion of Lance Peru."

Lance also took her to the races and she soon discovered the thrill of poring over a scratch sheet, phoning in her findings every morning and waiting for the results. She spent a lot of the time when Lance was absent having herself made more attractive for the time when he'd reappear.

She loved riding with him in the sleek black Cadillac he drove—and occasionally he let her drive it. The deep-throated purr of the motor, the sense of unleashed power in the big car, always seemed to transmit itself to her body and brought her as near to physical climax as she ever came.

Despite getting almost everything she wanted, Betty Jane was still driven by restlessness. Sometimes it was so great that she felt as though she were literally waiting for some sort of explosion. It was during those moments that her thoughts returned to Lotus Park. Several times she was on the verge of phoning Steve Harper, but always stopped herself. Once, after seeing a man on the street she at first thought was her father, she called Karen

Frocks, Inc., and asked for him. The moment he answered, she hung up without saying anything.

It wasn't long before she knew almost as much about Lance's work in the Syndicate as he knew himself. Occasionally, because of her insistence and the fact that he enjoyed her reactions, he would take her along on some simple visit to lesser members of the gang to remind them to stay in line. Sometimes, on a bigger job, he'd let her accompany him during the planning surveys. Lance Peru took great pride in being a careful craftsman and he basked in her admiration.

"There's only one thing to remember, baby," he said to her often. "The guy who knows exactly where everyone is going to be at a certain time is the one who makes the grade. The guy who doesn't winds up in the arms of a cop or on a slab."

There was a new excitement for Betty Jane when she discovered that Lance was one of the chief executioners for the Syndicate. Even when he didn't tell her, she always knew when he'd been on a killing. There would be a hard, driving passion in him afterward. She found herself responding to that more than to anything else and on such nights a strange compelling frenzy would take over her body the moment he touched her.

Then came a certain morning, after she had been with him almost six months, when she awakened to find him seated at the table, drinking black coffee and studying a map.

"Are we going somewhere?" she asked.

"No," he said shortly. "A job."

She poured her own coffee and sat opposite him. She was quiet, knowing she'd get it out of him as soon as he grew more relaxed.

Finally, he put the map to one side. He poured himself some more coffee and looked at her. As always, his gaze was at first impersonal and cool, as though she were a piece of furniture, then slowly his eyes warmed up. His gaze swept over her body, barely concealed by her negligee, and finally settled on her face. In the mornings when her make-up was slight, or nonexistent, Betty Jane looked almost her age despite the more mature hair-do. Her face still retained the healthy color of the very young; only the expression in her eyes belied her age.

"You're smart, baby," Lance Peru said. "I've seen a lot of girls come along, but most of them fall apart pretty quick. They start hitting the liquor, tea or the needle and the first thing you know they look like bags. You never touch the stuff and you keep right on looking like Miss America."

"I don't like any of that," Betty Jane said, shrugging. It was true that she had never drunk as much as the other girls in Lotus Park. With one exception, she had always stopped after two or three beers. She had drunk even less since leaving home. She was vaguely aware that she was afraid of alcohol—afraid of anything that lessened her control of a situation. She needed that sense of control and any degree of drunkenness robbed her of this. Nor did she need alcohol as others did; her own sense of power was far more stimulating than anything that could come out of a bottle or through a needle.

She took a sip of her coffee and stared at him over the rim of the cup. "What's the job, Lance?" she asked.

"A big one," he said. "There's a special D.A. in town who's been ordered to put the squeeze on the rackets. He's getting in our hair. Last night there was a meeting and it was decided he has to be hit."

She could feel the excitement mounting within her.

"We've been getting along fine," Lance said. "All the regular guys are in our pockets. But everything's been stirred up by the dock war and the race track scandal. So the Governor appoints a special District Attorney to look into any connection with the rackets. All because the guy's never given up the idea of getting to Washington and he wants all the headlines he can make. Only this new D.A. can't be bought and we haven't been able to get anything on him. So I guess we give him a ticket to a better land." He patted the gun in his shoulder holster and grinned.

"We?"

"Me," he said with pride. "This has to be done right and there can't be anything pointing to us. I'm going to start casing it today."

"Can I come along?" Betty Jane asked.

"Sure, baby."

"Is that why you had the map out?"

"Yeah. We already had a couple of boys checking this

D.A. One thing that looks good is that the guy does the same thing every day. He leaves his house at the same time every morning. We'll catch that tomorrow. A couple of dicks pick him up there. They stop at the corner drugstore and the two dicks wait outside while he goes in and calls his office from the phone booth. Then they drive straight down to his office."

"Why don't he call the office from his home?" Betty Jane asked.

"He thinks we might have his phone tapped." Lance grinned at her. "We do, too. Only he's never made anything but personal calls over it."

Betty Jane laughed. She had a sense of sharing in something that was big enough and important enough to threaten the governor of the state.

"At night," Lance continued, "he leaves the office always at the same time and the two dicks drive him home. We'll catch that tonight."

Betty Jane went swiftly around the table and kissed him lingeringly. It was a reward for letting her go with him.

Late that afternoon, Lance Peru and Betty Jane were parked in the Cadillac across the street from the special D.A.'s office.

Betty Jane was watching the entrance to the building when she saw a heavy-set, middle-aged man stride purposefully out to the curb. For a brief second, her heart pounded faster and she started to hide her face behind Lance's shoulder. She thought it was her father. Then she saw that the D.A. really looked quite different; it was only his general build, the way he walked that resembled her father.

"That's him," Lance said softly.

Betty Jane watched the man climb into a limousine, followed by two others. The dryness in her throat persisted, but she told herself fiercely that it was only because she was thirsty.

Keeping at a careful distance, they followed the limousine uptown and watched the man get out and walk into an apartment house. Then they swung back toward their own apartment.

The following day Lance had Betty Jane up earlier than she had been out of bed since quitting school. They

drove swiftly uptown and watched the heavy-set man emerge from the apartment house. They were two blocks away when he entered the drugstore, leaving the two detectives in the limousine. He was inside about five minutes and then came back to the car. They followed it, at a discreet distance, down to lower Manhattan.

The next day they followed the same procedure, only this time Betty Jane did the driving. Lance held a stop watch and made notes. That night they followed the car back uptown.

Each day for two weeks they went through the same routine. Betty Jane drove while Lance timed every move and made notes. Each night Lance would compare the notes with the ones he had made before. Finally, on the fourteenth night, Lance studied his notes and then tossed them aside.

"Okay," he said quietly. "I think I'll take him tomorrow morning." He glanced at his watch. "Guess I'll get Lew Monelli to drive for me."

"Lance," Betty Jane said.

His mind on the job, he didn't look at her. "Huh?" he said.

"Let me drive the car for you in the morning."

He looked at her sharply. "You're out of your head, baby."

"Don't I drive as well as Lew Monelli?" she demanded.

"Sure. Maybe better. But—"

"Don't I always do everything just the way you tell me to?"

"Yeah, but—"

"And," she interrupted triumphantly, "don't I already know the whole route?"

"Look, baby," he said, "I'll grant you all the things you're asking. On a job, you'd be better than a lot of guys I've worked with. But that doesn't mean I'm going to take you along."

"Why not?"

"Lots of reasons, baby. It's no good to work with a dame no matter how good she is. If it got noised around, there'd be a few guys who'd think I was slipping. I'd either have to slap them down or I *would* be slipping. And that would cause trouble in the organization."

"If anybody says anything, I'll slap them down myself," Betty Jane said.

He laughed. "I think you would at that, baby. Another thing, this job is no pushover. I'm going to take the guy when he's in the drugstore. That's the best spot. But I still have to come out of that store and there are going to be two cops waiting. There'll probably be some lead flying. I don't want my woman in the middle of it. I want to come home to you, not have to maybe carry you home to slow music."

"Please, Lance," she said.

He shook his head. "No. That's out, baby."

So Betty Jane argued in the only way she knew—with her body. It was a strong argument, as she well knew. It started in the kitchen, moved through the living room and ended in the bedroom where Betty Jane finally won. Lance agreed that she could drive the car.

The next morning they were up even earlier. They drove uptown and parked half a block above the drugstore. Lance left the motor running as he slid out from under the wheel. "Okay, baby," he said tightly. "They'll be here in about fifteen minutes. You'll be able to hear the shot from here. When you do, start driving slowly. I'll be out by the time you get in front of the store. Have the door open for me and be ready to step on it."

She nodded. Her throat was dry and her whole body felt hot. "Good luck, Lance," she said.

He grinned at her and walked away. There was a strange, stiff-legged quality to his walk. She watched him enter the store and then she sat and waited.

It was just fourteen minutes later when the limousine drove up and stopped in front of the drugstore. The heavy-set figure—the man who looked like her father but wasn't—got out and strolled in through the door. The two detectives climbed out of the car and took up their usual stance, covering both sides of the entrance. One of them glanced at the parked car. For a moment it looked as if he intended to investigate, but then he seemed to relax and his gaze swept elsewhere.

Betty Jane waited, gripping the wheel so fiercely that her hands hurt. But she was unaware of the pain. Her imagination was there inside the store, trying to conjure

up a picture of the man walking to meet the bullets of Lance Peru.

There were two quick shots, muffled by the distance and the brick walls. They sounded almost harmless, no more spiteful than the crack of a cap pistol, but in her mind's eye Betty Jane saw the familiar figure crumpling to the floor and she experienced a sharp physical pleasure that ran through her whole body like released fire.

Betty Jane automatically pressed on the accelerator and the Cadillac started rolling down the street. The scene in front of her unrolled like a slow motion movie. She saw the two detectives jerk to attention. As though pulled by a single string, they went in a strange, crouching run for the door to the drugstore. The door swung inward and they followed it, still in a crouch. The door had almost swallowed them, then it was spitting them out again. They backed up fast, splitting off on either side of the entrance. She could see the glitter of sunlight reflected from their guns.

The shots seemed to converge on each other. The Cadillac was now in front of the store and Betty Jane saw Lance Peru coming through the door. He was crouched over, his face twisted into an unrecognizable mask. The gun in his hand kept leaping, in little explosive motions, as though trying to jump out of his hand. She saw splinters explode from the doorsill near his head. The gun in his hand bucked again and she saw one of the detectives reeling away. A flower seemed to unfold huge red petals on the front of his white shirt.

Then Lance was at the car and she remembered to lean over and press the door handle. The door started to swing out, then Lance was jerking it the rest of the way open. He slid in sideways, firing again even as he closed the door. Gun smoke bit acridly at Betty Jane's nostrils; it seemed that she could feel the thrust of the gun deep in her own body.

"Get going, baby," Lance said hoarsely.

She heard a thud and spider lines traced over the glass next to Lance. She shoved her foot to the floor. Tires squealed on the pavement as the big Cadillac jolted forward, crushing her against the back of the seat. The speedometer needle swung wildly.

There was another shot from behind them, but it

seemed so far away that it had lost all of its spite. Betty Jane exulted in the surging power of the racing motor.

She saw the other car coming at the cross street. There was nothing she could do but hang on to the wheel and stiffen her body to meet the plunging object. She heard Lance shout hoarsely beside her, but Betty Jane felt as though the big Cadillac possessed her and there was nothing she could do but go where it took her.

The second car tried to swerve away, but there was no time and at the last moment it leaped into the side of the Cadillac. The screech of tortured metal seemed to echo and re-echo.

Then there was only the thin wail of a siren creeping through the city streets, hunting them out.

CHAPTER 10

When Betty Jane awakened she was in the hospital with a police guard at the door. Her left arm was in a splint and she hurt all over, but she soon discovered from one of the nurses that the broken arm was the most serious of her injuries. She also learned from the same nurse that she had been thrown from under the steering wheel against Lance Peru and been cushioned by his body from further damage. Lance, the nurse whispered, was dead. His throat had been cut when his head went through the windshield.

She felt nothing at all at the news that Lance was dead. He had been important to her in a way when she was with him, but the moment her eyes had opened on the hospital walls she had known it was something which was over. She had known, without being told, that there would be cops on the other side of the door and she had known Lance would be of no help to her against them. That alone signaled it was over. If she felt anything, it was relief, for it meant there would be no one to contradict any story she chose to tell about what had happened.

As soon as they knew she was awake, the police questioned her, but it did them no good. She had no idea what she was going to choose to tell them and until she did

have one she wasn't going to say anything. She stuck to that. They asked her questions in gentle voices and they shouted at her, but all she did was to shake her head and smile back. The police grew tired of this before she did.

The next morning she was transferred to the prison for women. They tried to question her again, but gave up after another hour of head-shaking and smiling. She was fingerprinted, photographed and put into a cell.

She had been there no more than a half-hour when the matron was back.

"A visitor for you, honey," the matron said, unlocking the door.

Betty Jane stared at her blankly.

"Your lawyer's here."

Betty Jane knew she didn't have a lawyer but she was too smart to say so. Maybe it was a trick and maybe it wasn't. Either way, she thought, she had nothing to lose as long as she kept her mouth shut. And there might be something to gain. She followed the matron out of the cell block.

The room into which she was ushered was small. The walls were whitewashed. A single naked electric bulb hung from the ceiling. There were a table and two chairs. A man sat in one of the chairs.

The matron withdrew and closed the door. Betty Jane stood and stared at the man. He was older, maybe fifty or more. His clothes were expensive and there was a general air of money and success about him. Betty Jane knew the signs and she was sure he was not a cop. His hair was gray, almost white. She examined his face, looking for more signs. His expression was different from that of Lance or any of his friends, yet there were also similarities. It was as though he possessed the same ruthlessness, but over it had applied layers of polish.

He bore her scrutiny in silence, finally smiling briefly when he saw she was finished. "Betty Jane—Peru?" he asked. The hesitation before the last name was slight but significant.

She nodded and waited.

"Does the name Tomaso Giulano mean anything to you?" he asked.

She recognized it at once. Tommy Blue Eyes. "I've heard the name," she said.

"Won't you sit down?" he asked, nodding toward the other chair.

She sat down, but didn't relax as she continued to watch him.

"Cigarette?" he asked, holding out a case. She took one. He lit hers and his own with a slim gold lighter. "My name is George Bolles," he said. "I am an attorney, occasionally representing Tomaso Giulano." Under cover of smoking, he was watching her closely. "Did you know that Lance Peru is dead?"

"I know," she said.

He nodded as though expressing approval. "Lance, I understand, often bragged that you were an unusual woman. I believe he was right. How old are you?"

She hesitated.

"The truth," he said gently.

"Seventeen," she said then.

He nodded again. "You understand that the police are charging you with being the accessory to murder?"

She looked her question and he answered it.

"The D.A. is dead," he said. "So is one of the detectives who was guarding him. Nothing in the world could have saved Lance from the electric chair if he had lived through the crash. You were driving the car for him. This means you'll be charged with the same crime."

She waited, admitting nothing in her expression.

"Under certain circumstances," he said, stressing the words slightly, "I am prepared to undertake your defense. I don't believe that we can get you out of this, but I think something can be done to make the penalty lighter. And there might be other advantages."

"What circumstances?" she asked. "And what advantages?" She had known the minute she saw the man that he wanted something; the only question was what. Usually, men had wanted only one thing from her; this was different, but not so different but what she could sense it.

"Very sensible questions," George Bolles said. "But first let me explain something to you. A special District Attorney is dead. He was killed by Lance Peru. It was known that the District Attorney was looking for con-

nections between recent crimes and a certain organization. Lance Peru has been known to have been connected with this organization. The conclusion is an obvious one which is already being drawn by the newspapers. My client would prefer that this conclusion be dropped and another one picked up. The present line of thought, taken by the press and the police, could be very inconvenient for my client." He smiled bleakly.

"What's that got to do with me?" Betty Jane asked.

"Did Lance ever mention to you that he previously knew this special District Attorney?"

She was surprised and showed it as she shook her head.

"He may have thought it unimportant," the lawyer said. "Lance was, I might say, a most efficient man. He seldom let his personal feelings have any bearing on the work he did. But this District Attorney was some ten years ago the District Attorney of an upstate county. In that capacity, he successfully prosecuted Lance Peru. It was the only time that Lance was ever in prison. Lance may have thought that had no bearing on the present job, but it did. It was one of the chief reasons that Lance was given the job of taking care of the D.A."

"A double-cross?" Betty Jane asked.

"Not exactly. It was expected that Lance would be successful. Still there was always a chance that something might go wrong—as it did. Therefore, Lance was chosen for the job because of his personal grudge against the victim. As soon as it becomes apparent to the law that this was a vengeance killing, with a purely personal motive, the heat will be taken off those to whom it could do the most harm. You understand?"

"No," she said truthfully.

"To put it more bluntly," he said, "if it can be proved that the murder of the D.A. was done at the instigation of a certain organization, public opinion may be so aroused that it will cost the organization millions of dollars. If the murder can be proved to have been the personal act of a man with a grudge, the organization will be more or less forgotten."

Betty Jane shrugged. "What difference does it make to me?"

"You are the only living person who can actually testify as to why Lance Peru went to Morningside

Heights to kill a man yesterday morning. You are the only person to whom a man like Lance Peru might have revealed his motives."

"Which brings us," Betty Jane said, not without a touch of humor in her voice, "to circumstances and advantages."

"Precisely," the lawyer said. He dropped his cigarette on the concrete floor and carefully ground it beneath his heel. "The circumstances are that you tell the police and the court why Lance decided to kill the D.A. The advantages are, I believe, threefold. Such a picture of Lance will, I think, improve your own position. I think it might be easy to paint a picture of coercion and fear which would be very moving to a jury. The second advantage is that I will be your attorney—without charge of course." He hesitated.

"The third?" she prompted.

"I believe," he said carefully, "that you were responsible for starting a business of your own. It has recently been operated by others, but you have continued to get money from it. As a matter of fact, about two thousand dollars a week. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"My client will continue this arrangement. A part of this money, not large enough to arouse undue suspicion, will be sent to you each week you are in prison and the balance will be kept and turned over to you upon your release."

"How do I know he'll do it?"

"You have my word for it," the lawyer said with dignity. "I assure you that two thousand dollars a week is nothing to the organization in question. And they will consider the money well spent under the circumstances I have mentioned."

Betty Jane thought about it. She was smart enough to have no illusions about her position. She knew she was in a tough spot and she would need all the help she could get. This seemed to be the way to get it.

"Okay," she said.

"Good," the lawyer said. "Now tell me something about yourself and we'll see what we can do."

Betty Jane told him briefly. There were not many im-

portant facts in her recital, but enough for him to see that there were probably more for the digging.

"I'll come back and see you again tomorrow," he said finally. "Now, one more thing. What have you told the police so far?"

"Nothing," Betty Jane said.

"Smart girl," he said approvingly. "Don't tell them anything until after I visit you tomorrow. Then we'll go carefully over what you will tell them. And we'll start working on your defense. I can't promise you anything except that I'll do my best for you."

"Okay," she said.

She watched him leave. Then the matron came in and led her back to her cell.

The police did question her again. Once that afternoon, once that night and again the following morning. Betty Jane merely stared vacantly at them and said nothing.

True to his promise, George Bolles was back that next day. The matron came and led her to the same room.

"How are you today?" the lawyer asked as the matron left.

"Okay," she said.

"Then we'll get right to work." A brief smile came and went on his face. "I've promised the police that I will try to convince you that you should talk." He went on to brief her in what she was to say about Lance Peru and his lust for revenge against the District Attorney. He included a picture of how she had been forced to go with Lance and how he had threatened to beat her when she protested. When he was through, he began asking her questions. He was surprised and pleased to see how well she remembered every detail he'd told her.

"Excellent," he said when she had finished. "You'll do very nicely, my girl. I have only one other suggestion. You might try practicing a tear in the eye and an ache in the throat when you come to the part about Lance threatening to beat you. I think we can make quite a case of your being attracted to Lance because he was kind to you and the effect of his suddenly turning on you." He paused and looked directly at her. "I was out to Lotus Park this morning."

"So?" she asked. The mere mention of Lotus Park was enough to bring her defiance back to the surface.

"No one there knows where you are," he said calmly. "But they will as soon as you've talked to the police." He examined her again, looking for some crack in the wall of her exterior. "How would you feel if the defense made villains out of your mother and father?"

"What do you mean?"

"I have a pretty clear picture," he said carefully, "of what your life was like in Lotus Park. Properly presented, I believe it will show that your parents—in the way they raised you and acted toward you—drove you away from home and into the arms of Lance Peru, and so eventually into driving the murder car."

Without knowing why, Betty Jane liked the picture he painted. It brought down on her mother and father no more than she felt they deserved. It removed the blame for the present situation from her own shoulders. The picture of the martyred daughter was not too different from the way she had always seen herself.

"Why not?" she answered.

"Then," he said with relief, "I think we can make a good case for you. You talk to the police this afternoon and we'll get started on the defense tomorrow." He reached over and patted her hand. To her surprise it was a completely impersonal gesture. "Good girl," he added. He stood up and left.

That afternoon when the police questioned her, Betty Jane told them the story in which the lawyer had coached her. She was smart enough not to blurt it all out at once and she thought she gave a very creditable performance when it came to describing the way Lance had abused her. The police must have thought so too, for the gruff police matron suddenly became very maternal.

Later she was permitted to go through it again, polishing the few rough edges of her performance, for several newspaper reporters. George Bolles was there by then—arriving, in fact, in time to make Betty Jane comb her hair into more girlish lines for the photographers—and he gave her a quick nod of approval when she'd finished. This did not go unnoticed by the reporters but they left it out of their copy. A pity to spoil a good story with a jarring note.

That night, the matron brought her the evening papers

and Betty Jane enjoyed all the comforts of being a celebrity except the important one of freedom.

The newspaper headlines had one immediate result. It was barely time for visiting hours the next day when the matron appeared to unlock Betty Jane's cell.

"Mr. Bolles?" Betty Jane asked.

The matron shook her head. "He's waiting to see you, honey," she said, "but he said this visitor should see you first."

"Who is it?"

"You'll see," the matron said, with the coyness that only a woman of fifty can achieve.

Betty Jane opened the door to the visiting room and stepped inside, the muscles of her legs tense with nervousness. Then she saw the figure seated at the table and relaxed.

"Hi, Bett," Steve Harper said. He grinned at her.

"Hi," Betty Jane answered. It was the first time she had seen him for almost a year and she studied him with interest. He had lost the look of boyishness; his face was leaner and it already had the lines of one who has accepted the responsibilities of manhood.

"How are you, Bett?" he asked.

"Okay," she said. She sat down in the chair across from him. "Got a cigarette?"

"Sure." He reached in his pocket and brought out a pack. When she had taken one, he struck a match and held it for her. "You need anything?"

She shook her head.

"Take the rest of these anyway," he said, shoving the pack of cigarettes across the table.

She took them and held them in her hand. She tried to sort out her mixed feelings about Steve. She had always gotten more genuine acceptance from him than anyone else, so she had less fear with him, less of a need to make an impression. She'd always been able to express more hostility toward him, knowing that he wouldn't reject her because of it. In a way, she was glad that he had come to see her, but it was mostly the satisfaction of knowing that he still would. If he'd shown up the first day of her arrest her pleasure might have been more genuine, for then she'd had a real need; now with the machinery of the Syndicate moving in her be-

half, she could fall back on the luxury of affectionate contempt. But she was confused. She could tell that Steve still loved her, yet she sensed that for the first time he was more in control of the situation than she was.

"How'd you know where to find me?" she asked.

"The newspapers," he said. His face was more serious than she had ever seen it, but he was keeping his voice light and casual. "That picture of you was real gone. The mostest."

She grinned. "I'll bet you tell that to all the girls you see in jail."

"Sure," he said soberly.

"I guess they did a big newspaper business at Jemmy's Malt Shop last night and this morning," she suggested.

"A sell-out," he agreed.

She felt anger rising in her throat and pushed it back down. Why, she thought, did he make her ask for the only information she really wanted?

"Anybody been out to interview the happy mother and father yet?" she asked flippantly.

"Yeah. There were reporters there last night and this morning. Your father threw them out."

"Always the hospitable father," she said lightly. "Or was that his idea of defending my honor?"

Steve looked uncomfortable. "Nobody likes the way he's acting. Dad and some others tried talking to him but it didn't do any good."

Betty Jane stared at him, her face tight. "What do you mean, the way he's acting?"

"You remember when he had the heart attack?" Steve asked.

She nodded.

"That was about six months ago," he said, and looked away from her. "He got over the attack all right, but ever since then he insists that he has no daughter. Your mother told my mother that he doesn't even allow her to mention your name."

"A lot I care," Betty Jane said, with a familiar toss of her head. "He wasn't such a big deal himself."

"That isn't the point," Steve said, facing her squarely again. "Maybe it was wrong for you to run away from home the way you did—I'm not going to give you a lecture on it," he added hurriedly as he saw her expres-

sion. "The point is now you're in trouble and you need help. Maybe he was hurt by what you did, but he ought to help you anyway."

"Who needs his help?"

"Look, Bett," Steve said, "I talked with my folks this morning and they said I should come to see you. They said I could tell you that they'll help all they can. Maybe it won't be much, but at least we can get you a lawyer and see that you have a fighting chance."

She stared at him in amazement. "Why?" she asked.

"They've always liked you," he said. "And then they know how I feel about you. That's enough reason for them to help."

She lit a fresh cigarette off the old one, dropping the butt to the floor and grinding it under her heel. When she spoke, her voice was harsh. "Are you about to spin that old platter about taking me out of all this if only I marry you and let you support me?"

"No," he said gravely. "I was trying to tell you that my folks want to help you get a lawyer or something."

"How much does your father make?" she demanded.

"I don't know—maybe a hundred and fifty bucks a week. But—"

She threw back her head and laughed. "That's a howl," she said. "You know how much money *I've* been making? Two thousand bucks a week. And I've got friends who think *that's* cigarette money. I've got a lawyer and not the kind of cheap ambulance chaser that could be hired by somebody who makes a hundred and fifty bucks a week. I've got dresses that cost more than a hundred and fifty bucks. So what could your old man do for me? Or maybe I should still marry you? Where would that get me?"

His face had whitened under the onslaught. "I don't know where it would get you," he said, standing up. "But I know where you are." He turned toward the door.

Betty Jane's anger left her as suddenly as it had appeared, to be replaced by a sudden panic at losing what little support she had.

"Steve," she said, her voice sounding small and very young.

He turned to look at her.

"I—I'm sorry," she said. The tears came unbidden to

her eyes. "I didn't mean to say any of those things."

He stepped across the room and put his arms awkwardly about her. "It's okay, Bett," he said.

"No, it isn't," she said, crying against his shoulder. She was suddenly immersed in her own grief, but a small part of her was alert for some sign in him of the one reaction she expected from men. When she did not immediately detect it, she leaned more purposefully against him. When that didn't produce the anticipated results, she switched her tactics. "I shouldn't talk that way about your father and mother. They're real cool." Betty Jane was unaware that the revision to bop language was another attempt to put the two of them back on the old footing.

"You're pretty cool yourself," Steve said, automatically falling in with her mood. He ran a hand playfully through her hair and stepped back to look down at her. "So what about it, Bett?"

"What about what?"

"What shall I tell them?"

This time she kept a firm grip on her emotions and smiled sweetly up at him. "Tell them that I think they're the most and I love them madly. But I do have a lawyer, Steve—a very good one who's waiting right now to see me."

"I'm going," he said, not minding the hint since it was accompanied by a smile. "But I'll be back. I'll bring you cigarettes and anything else you want. Candy or magazines?"

"Anything you want to bring," she said demurely. The little smile didn't fade from her face until he was through the door.

CHAPTER 11

During the weeks before her trial, there were many changes in Betty Jane. Under the guidance of George Bolles, she gave up the sophisticated clothes she had been wearing. Once more she assumed what was almost the uniform of the American schoolgirl: saddle shoes, short socks, skirt and sweater. Make-up almost disappeared

from her face and her simply arranged blonde hair emphasized the extreme youthfulness of her features. In the same way, she dropped her newly acquired speech mannerisms and reverted to talking like thousands of other seventeen-year-old girls. Having a strong sense of self-dramatization, Betty Jane followed the lawyer's instructions with zeal. The masquerade became almost perfect—except for the expression in her eyes when she occasionally forgot to mask it with lowered lashes.

When the transformation was well on its way, George Bolles developed other angles. A steady stream of sob sister reporters and special feature writers poured into the jail. Dozens of stories, with pictures, appeared in the newspapers and magazines. Nor was the Lotus Park angle ignored. Interviews with dozens of teen-agers who had known Betty Jane were published. In most cases the writers were interested only in the story as they saw it and interviews were easily led in that direction. Nearly all of them, because it was dramatic, made much of the fact that Robert J. Allen insisted that he no longer had a daughter.

Under the pressure of the high-powered publicity directed at Betty Jane, the so-called Crime Syndicate was soon forced into the background. The story of a young girl, starved for love and finally getting it from a man who then terrorized her into helping him with his crime of vengeance, was more appealing without the suggestion of powerful and sinister underworld figures pulling strings behind the scenes. People, the writers and editors told themselves, were tired of hearing of crime barons and czars. Aging Frank Costello facing the possibility of another trial, Joe Adonis fighting deportation, or Lucky Luciano pining away in Naples had nothing in common with the tragic love of a seventeen-year-old girl.

All the stops were pulled out and America had a good cry over Betty Jane Allen. And in her cell, mothered by the matrons and clucked at by every amateur social worker who could get within clucking distance, Betty Jane read every story and loved every word. She needed little encouragement to accept this picture as the real one. Her idea of herself had always been glamorous but vague. This was something solid and its appearance and re-

appearance in print gave it the illusion of truth. Millions of others accepted it and so did Betty Jane.

By the time her trial started, Betty Jane entered the courtroom almost as well armed as the innocent—in some ways even better armed, for she had George Bolles on her side.

During the days that followed, Betty Jane glimpsed many familiar faces in the crowded courtroom. Her father's was never among them but her disappointment was halved by the daily appearance of her mother. Cynthia Allen always sat far in the back, but even so Betty Jane could frequently see a parade of anger, shame and bitterness across her face as the trial unfolded. It was a sight that gave added zest to Betty Jane's own performance when she finally took the stand, although she did not let it distract her from her larger audience—the writers and photographers who sat in the press section.

The District Attorney had very little heart to put into the fight himself. He had certain hopes for a political future and he had no intention of blasting them by becoming known as the prosecutor of this attractive blonde girl. He was pretty certain why her lawyer was George Bolles—a man who had frequently been mentioned in certain invesigative reports, although always without proof—but he didn't mention in court the better known figures who might be paying the bill. He felt that such remarks would be unpopular in too many important quarters. He contented himself with proving that, while there might have been extenuating circumstances, Betty Jane Allen, alias Betty Jane Chalice, alias Betty Jane Hamill, alias Betty Jane Peru—and this was the only hint that her brief fling had been more complex than was indicated by the death of Lance Peru—had been an accessory before the fact of the murder of a Special District Attorney of the County of New York, State of New York.

The District Attorney had many things in his brief case, but most of them stayed there. He knew all about Mrs. Chalice and her oft-repeated telephone number, including what could be bought by dialing it. He not only knew about Eddie Hamill but he also possessed some impassioned testimony given by Eddie in the heat of his first rage. He knew, or could guess, almost everything

about Betty Jane during the year since she'd left home—save only that brief interlude which had starred Teddy Dillon. Only Betty Jane and Teddy Dillon knew about that, but Teddy spent a number of weeks fighting the temptation to duck behind his desk every time his door opened.

All these things the D.A. had in his possession, and once he had intended to use them to his own and the state's glory. But in the end he correctly guessed that the public feeling was such that the truth would make a bigger bum out of him than it would out of Betty Jane. That he was right was proved in the early days of the trial when a television commentator dropped the hint that there might be more to the story than was coming out. The newsman was inundated by so many letters of protest that his sponsor gave him a strong lecture on the sanctity of young American womanhood.

As a result, the D.A. and the Defense Attorney made almost the same summation to the jury. The gist of it was that Betty Jane was a more or less innocent victim of her unfortunate environment, and that she needed to be restrained only long enough for the state to help rehabilitate her. It never occurred to Betty Jane, immersed as she was in the picture of herself that was being unfolded, to wonder why her own lawyer didn't demand that she be turned completely free. At the moment the Syndicate existed for her only in terms of the paternal care of George Bolles; it never occurred to her that they might prefer to have her locked up until interest in what she might say died down.

If there were still any doubts in the minds of the jury, the judge removed them in his final instructions. "This," he said, "is one of those cases where the court wishes it possessed the power also to pass judgment upon the parents of the defendant. It is obvious to the court that this child might never have appeared here if her home had satisfied the needs of a growing child in terms of love and security. . . ."

As he spoke, Betty Jane saw her mother rise in the back of the room and furtively leave. The stricken look on her mother's face gave her a savage sense of power.

By the time the jury retired, it was a cinch that not only was the Syndicate forgotten—so were Lance Peru

and the victim. Anticipating the sentiments of the jury and the court, one reporter wrote that perhaps Betty Jane "needed locking up to protect her from her parents and society."

The jury found Betty Jane guilty—under the law and considering the words of the defense attorney, they could do no less—but recommended clemency in the strongest words they could find. The judge, with one eye on the note-taking of the reporters, made another long speech about parents and then sentenced Betty Jane to a girls' detention home until she was twenty-one.

Later—when there was no longer an audience—reality came closer to Betty Jane. She was less jubilant over the verdict than her attorney.

"Look," he said in what was to be their last talk together, "you drew only a four-year sentence. When you consider the charge and that the evidence was incontestable, it's pretty good. You can do it, as the saying goes, standing on your head."

"But I'm still the one who has to do it," Betty Jane pointed out. She was beginning to feel the injured party. She had completely accepted the things that had been said and implied during the trial and within that framework it seemed to her that somebody else should be going to prison—her mother and father or somebody—while she was turned loose to enjoy herself.

"True," George Bolles said. "We may, however, be able to shorten that four years. It might be possible, in one or two years, to get you out on parole. I assure you that we will at least try. In the meantime, my client—" since that first day the name of Tomaso Giulano, alias Tommy Blue Eyes, had never been mentioned— "will send you fifty dollars every week—the authorities will not allow you to receive more than that. The rest of the money he will save for you. Even if you should have to serve the full sentence, it won't be so bad. At the end of four years you will have close to four hundred thousand dollars—almost a half-million. Many a girl would give four years of her life for that much money."

The mention of the money did bring a sparkle to Betty Jane's eyes.

"I tried," the lawyer continued, "to have them send you to Girls Camp on Welfare Island. That's a model

detention home and I think you would have found the time even easier to do there. But it couldn't be arranged. They're transferring you to the State Correction Farm for Girls, but that won't be bad either. You can be sure, my dear girl, that we will be doing everything we can for your welfare while you are there."

She looked at him and felt the resentment stirring within her. "You'd better," she said. It was the first time she had indicated an awareness that she was being helped for a reason, the first time she had shown anything except a docile desire to do what she was told.

"To be sure," he said smoothly. He snapped the lock on his brief case and the same action seemed to lock up the expression on his face. "Good luck, Betty Jane." He rose and held out his hand.

She ignored the hand, staring at him with controlled hostility. This final gesture made her realize that the show was over and that everyone was going home or on to the next show except her. She was being held over, but the starring role was gone. The smile she gave him was a travesty of the schoolgirl one she'd been wearing with such fixed determination. "Thanks, dad," she said, and the words were now a mockery too. "You've been real cool. You tell the man what I said. Keep stacking up that long green for me. It makes me relax, but when I'm fretful I start remembering how Lance Peru talked in his sleep. You dig me, dad?"

George Bolles smiled coldly and left.

"Bolles," she said as the door closed. She made his name sound like something indecent.

Two days later she was transferred upstate to the State Correction Farm for Girls. She paid little attention to the trip, or to the other girls who rode with her, for she was feeling sorry for herself. The "innocent victim of sadistic parents" was the way George Bolles had described her in the courtroom. "More sinned against than sinning" he had put it another time. Betty Jane had taken these words to heart and they had deadened the feelings of guilt that occasionally gripped her. Having accepted this hand-painted portrait, she could see the State Correction Farm only as another injustice. She had retreated within herself in the face of the insoluble.

Arriving at the Farm, she went through a physical

examination, waited her turn at the showers, then put on the new clothes she'd been issued. The dress was an attractive blue denim, but to Betty Jane it seemed horrible.

She sulked through a half-hour examination by the psychologist and was finally escorted in to see the head matron. The sheaf of papers, which had been accumulating as she went along, was placed on the official's desk.

The head matron was a middle-aged woman, who might just as easily have been a successful executive in any one of a dozen businesses. Her face bore the marks of kindness and intelligence. To that was added what might have been understanding as she glanced over the papers. But Betty Jane saw none of this. She saw only the vague outlines of authority crouching behind a desk.

"Betty Jane," the matron said finally, looking up with a smile, "I'm Mrs. Crawford. I'm in charge here, but I hope you won't look upon me as a female warden. We try to avoid that sort of atmosphere here. You may, if you like, consider me more of a house mother. I hope that you will not find your stay with us too unpleasant."

"I'll get along," Betty Jane said flatly. She wasn't defiant; she just wasn't having any.

"Of course you will," Mrs. Crawford said pleasantly. "I don't know what you've been led to expect, Betty Jane, but this is not a prison in the usual sense of the word."

"Okay," Betty Jane said, "I'll check out then."

Mrs. Crawford smiled with the patience of one who has heard the same joke many times and didn't consider it much of a joke even at first. "While we can't go quite that far," she said, "I think you'll find you have a lot of freedom. There are no prison cells. We have several dormitories and they are locked only at night. The girls have rooms in these dormitories. There are three girls to a room, but each girl has her own bed and her own dresser. The doors to these rooms are never locked. There are no guards patrolling the hallway every hour. We are here to try to help you, not to punish you. Are there any questions you'd like to ask."

"Yeah. When do I get out of here?"

"In four years, I believe," Mrs. Crawford answered in a matter-of-fact tone. "In a few days, Betty Jane, you will be assigned some sort of work to do. You will be paid

for your work in the form of credit in the Farm stores, or we will start a savings account for you if you like." She pretended not to see the sneer on Betty Jane's face. "I am sure that you will soon get the feel of the place and that after that it will be much easier. Whenever you need help, you will always find Miss Willis, the psychologist, or myself available. There is only one other thing right now . . ."

She paused and Betty Jane stared unemotionally at her, waiting for her to continue, with the air of one who has nothing else to do.

"I am familiar with your story," Mrs. Crawford finally said. "I have seen all of the reports on it and most of the newspaper stories. I'm aware that your background lacked many things. I also know that you are an intelligent girl and I hope that you haven't let your lawyer and the newspapers blind you to the fact that you are also responsible for the things which led you here. What I'm trying to say, Betty Jane, is, don't come in here feeling sorry for yourself. There are hundreds of girls here who started off with no more, many with less. Feeling sorry for yourself will not take you far with these girls."

"Who wants to go far with them?" Betty Jane asked.

Mrs. Crawford sighed, but the expression on her face did not change. "You may go," she said, her hand already reaching for the next set of papers.

Outside, a matron waited for her. She was taken to the commissary where she was issued more clothes—until they were piled high on her arms. Then she was led outdoors, across the well-kept grounds, and into a long, rambling building labeled DORMITORY A.

The hallways of the dormitory weren't quite what Betty Jane had expected. The walls were painted a pleasant blue instead of the flat whitewash that had been used in the city jail. The floor and walls were clean, but there was no strong odor of lye which she had come to associate with being locked up. As they passed the closed doors of rooms, she could hear girls laughing and talking. It failed, however, to make her feel better.

On the second floor, the matron stopped in front of a door marked 2B. She knocked and opened the door, motioning Betty Jane to enter.

It was a large, cheerful-looking room. On two of the walls hung several pictures. There was space for three neat, single beds. Beside each bed stood a small chest of drawers and a dressing table with mirror. A half-open doorway revealed a toilet and shower. Except for an air of neatness, it didn't look too different from a college dormitory room.

There were two girls in the room. They had obviously been lying on their beds, but now they were sitting up, eyeing Betty Jane with frank curiosity.

One of them was a big red-headed girl, long-limbed and proportioned on a generous scale, with an attractive, friendly face. The other was blonde like Betty Jane, smaller but with a whiplike tension to her body. There was no smile on her face as she studied the newcomer from beneath her half-drawn lids.

"A new roommate, girls," the matron said cheerfully. "This is Betty Jane Allen. Betty Jane, this is Mildred King and Joan Hill. They'll show you the ropes." With that, she was gone.

Betty Jane dumped her clothes on top of the bare dresser that was obviously hers and sat down on the bed. She started to reach for a cigarette before she realized she had none. She looked up, returning the glances of the other girls, but without interest.

"Got a cigarette?" she asked.

"Sure, honey." It was the big redhead who tossed her a pack, along with a folder of matches.

Betty Jane took a cigarette and lit it. She was finally aware of the gazes still fixed on her as though waiting. She tossed the cigarettes and matches carelessly in the direction of the redhead. "Thanks," she said, not really meaning it.

"Okay," the red-headed girl said. She laughed, a good-natured sound that seemed to match her face. "That Mrs. Watson! She never remembers to say which one of us is which. I'm Milly King and this is Joan."

"Oh," Betty Jane said. She hoped they would get the idea that she didn't care.

"Sometimes," Milly King continued in the same friendly voice, "it helps to get acquainted if you know the rest of it. You know, the rap. I'm here for soliciting. The third offense. They paroled me the first two times."

She giggled. "I tried to tell them it wasn't the money—sometimes I didn't charge them anything—it's just that I like men."

"A lousy cop framed her," the little blonde said. Her voice sounded as taut as her body looked. "He needed an entry on the squeal book so he picked her up."

"But he was nice before he arrested me," the redhead protested. "You want to tell her about you, Joan?"

"Tell her yourself if you want to."

"She's in on *grand* larceny," Milly King said proudly. "She got way more than a thousand dollars' worth of stuff out of department stores before they caught her."

Betty Jane looked at them with contempt.

"We already know all about you," Milly continued.

For the first time, Betty Jane looked interested. "You do?" she asked. "How come?"

"We know everything that goes on outside," the redheaded girl said. "You'd be surprised—sometimes we know it in here as soon as it's known outside. I'll bet we knew you were being sent here even before you did. And you should have heard some of the girls when they heard you were going to be put in with Joan and me. They were dying of envy."

The little blonde had stretched out on her bed in an attitude that indicated the state of envy was not entirely unanimous.

"Why?" Betty Jane asked.

"Because you're a big shot," Milly said. "Everybody in here knows about Lance Peru and what a big shot he was. You were his girl and you even went on jobs with him. It ain't often that somebody that important gets sent here. I guess maybe you miss him, huh, honey?"

Betty Jane realized, without any sense of shock, that she had almost forgotten what Lance looked like. All she could really remember about him was his hard, driving dominance. That and the way his toughness melted when she was in his arms.

"Why should I miss him?" she said. "There's always more men. What I miss is my clothes, the night clubs, the excitement of doing things. How do you stand it in this place?"

"Honey," Milly said sadly, "in here there ain't always more men. That's the toughest part of it. Maybe you

miss your dress now, but before long what you're going to miss is that nothing ever happens after you take a dress off. Of course, there are the vots, but it ain't the same thing."

"Vots?" Betty Jane asked.

"Sure." It was the little blonde who answered her. "Vots, florabelles, dikes, lesbians, lady-lovers. Didn't you big shots ever hear of them?" There was no missing the hostility in her voice.

"I've heard of them," Betty Jane said. She remembered some talk about lesbians at school, but she had never paid much attention. She knew that they existed and that was about all. "But who cares?"

"I care," wailed the redhead, "only I don't like them. They give me the creeps. And there ain't no men."

"Miss Hot-Pants of 1954 and every other year," Joan Hill said with scorn. She caught the look on Betty Jane's face. "Don't look so superior, Miss Big Shot. Sure, Milly was a hustler and liked her work, but the only difference between you and her is that she liked what she was doing more than she liked what she was getting out of it."

Anger flooded over Betty Jane until she could feel her body growing rigid with it. But there was fear mixed in. She didn't know why, but suddenly she was afraid. All she could do was stare at the other girl, all her hot anger gathered in her eyes. "I never solicited," she said.

"No?" Joan Hill asked. There was a twisted smile on her pretty lips. "You solicited Lance Peru, didn't you? Only you were asking more than the two bucks Milly would have charged him. You solicited him every time you wanted a new dress, or a permanent, or wanted him to do something for you, didn't you."

"Don't," Milly King said. "She wasn't bothering me any." But neither girl paid any attention to her.

Briefly, Betty Jane's fear had the upper hand. For a stark moment, she faced herself as this little blonde girl saw her instead of the way it had been in her fantasies. She thought she was going to faint—then her mind scuttled crablike away from the picture drawn by Joan Hill. She remembered how Lance Peru had turned back at the doorway and said, "Want to come along?" Everything else she pushed away until her memory was almost

virginal. Her fear receded, leaving her shaken with anger.

"Drop dead," she said harshly.

Joan Hill laughed. "Okay, sweetie," she said. She had seen Betty Jane's fear, brief as it was, and it had taken the edge from her malice. "I don't care how you peddled it, only don't start sneering at somebody else because they didn't get as much as you did. All of us are sitting on the same million dollars only some of us don't care."

Milly King giggled with released tension. "Sometimes she's a riot with the things she says," she explained to Betty Jane. She leaned forward, anxious to heal the temporary rift. "You'll like it here, Betty Jane. It ain't really so bad except when you get to thinking about there not being any men. We have movies once a week and sometimes they even have entertainers come here—then you can at least see a man. We have square dances and parties and picnics and they're really not very strict as long as you do your work and go to the school classes. . . ."

She chattered on and on while Betty Jane withdrew into herself, nursing her anger and her self-sorrow.

"Milly, you only know how to do two things," Joan finally grumbled good-naturedly. "With no men around, that leaves us stuck with your talking. You know," she went on, for Betty Jane's benefit, "it's almost chow time and one of the rules here is that our room has to be completely cleaned up before we go to eat."

"I don't think I'm hungry," Betty Jane said coldly.

"She doesn't think she's hungry," Joan repeated mockingly. "If you want to go on a diet, that's okay with me, sweetie. But the point is that the room has to be clean and if it isn't all three of us get punished for it. You haven't put your things away yet."

Betty Jane glanced at the clothes stacked on top of her dresser, then back at the blonde girl. "If you're worried about it, you put them away," she said.

The big redhead leaped to her feet. "Come on, Betty Jane," she urged. "I'll help you and it won't take a minute."

"Milly," Joan said sharply, "sit down." She waited until the redhead subsided unhappily on her bed. "Maybe Miss Big Shot is used to having somebody hang up her mink stole for her, but in here she puts away her own

denim. You're not going to start waiting on her now or any other time. . . . Well, chick?"

"Go to hell," Betty Jane said tightly.

The little blonde came up off her bed like an unleashed spring and darted across the room. "Baby," she said, "I've been aching to do this ever since you waltzed in here." She swung her arm and the flat of her hand cracked against Betty Jane's cheek.

There was a moment of shock while Betty Jane accepted the reality of what had happened. Then her anger uncoiled, pushing her up off the bed. She reached out and twisted her hand in the blonde hair and yanked as hard as she could. She felt the girl's nails rake across her face and there was an exultation in the stinging of her own flesh.

The two hard young bodies came together with a savage thrust. They swayed there for a moment, then toppled to the floor. The dressing table crashed beside them. Milly King squealed loudly, but neither of them heeded her.

Betty Jane had never fought before in her life. Even as a small child, the looming figure of her mother had kept her from striking back. She had never done anything with her body that was not carefully schooled and controlled. Now, suddenly, she was releasing all the locked-up tension, letting it flood out through her body in a primitive burst of fury.

It seemed to her that everywhere she turned it was only to encounter the hard little fists, the clawing nails or the jabbing knees of Joan. But there was as much joy in being hit as there was in hitting. She knew she was scoring, too. She could feel the soft flesh giving way under her blows. She could hear the other girl's breath hissing between her teeth and it spurred Betty Jane on to an orgasmic pitch.

Another piece of furniture crashed beside them. Betty Jane twisted away from a searching knee and felt the clothes rip off her shoulder. She saw the rigid fingers, sharp nails gleaming, as they stabbed at her exposed breast. Her teeth clicked together loudly as the hand withdrew barely in time.

They both became aware of the shouting voice at the same moment. For a second they remained locked to-

gether, recognition creeping in over their concentration on each other. Then they sprawled apart, glancing toward the open door where the angry matron stood. Beyond her they could see a huddled group of girls.

"What's the meaning of this?" the matron demanded. "Look at yourselves!"

They were both considerably battered. Joan's dress was torn in two places, there was a large bruise on one cheek and scratches on the other. Betty Jane's face and arms were scratched and on one side her dress, slip and brassiere had been torn to the waist.

A shrill wolf whistle came from the group of girls in the hallway, but when the angry matron looked around it was impossible to tell where it had originated. She turned back to the two girls on the floor.

"Well?" she demanded again. "What's the meaning of this?"

It was Joan Hill who answered, forcing a little laugh through her bruised mouth. "She came in here," she said, nodding her head toward Betty Jane, "bragging that she was stronger than Milly or me. I challenged her to hand-wrestle—and I guess maybe we got a little more enthusiastic than we meant to."

The matron's angry gaze swept back to Betty Jane. "Is that right—you—what's your name?—Betty Jane?"

Betty Jane hesitated, her anger only partly abated. She wanted to accuse the other girl, but she found the words stopping before she could hurl them out. The sudden assault had cracked the wall she was building around herself just enough so she could sense the atmosphere; she knew that the accusation would do her no good, even with the matron. And she was sharply aware of the probing eyes that weighed her from the hallway.

"Yes," she said.

It was the matron's turn to hesitate. She was sure that she wasn't being told the truth, but she decided not to force it further. So far as it was possible, she usually let the girls work such things out by themselves.

"All right," she said briskly. "Try not to be so enthusiastic the next time. You're both a little big for such tomboy stuff. You've got about twenty minutes to clean

up your room—and yourselves. . . . The rest of you back to your rooms."

Betty Jane climbed to her feet and sullenly began picking up the clothes that were scattered over the floor.

CHAPTER 12

The first few months were not much different for Betty Jane than her first day. There was, she discovered, a group of girls who looked up to her as a celebrity because of Lance Peru and the rumors of her connections with the Syndicate. These rumors were strengthened by the arrival every week of a crisp fifty-dollar bill in a letter addressed to her. There never was any message in the letter, only the money. Betty Jane answered all questions with a mysterious smile which enhanced her reputation among that special clique. They did much to make life bearable, for most of them would do anything for her.

There was another group which, like Milly King, was willing to accept her at face value and be as friendly as she would permit. There was still a third group, to which Joan Hill belonged; they were spontaneously hostile and exerted themselves at every opportunity to make her lose the feeling of difference to which she clung.

If it had been possible for Betty Jane to associate exclusively with those who admired her, or if she'd had to be only with those who were hostile, things might have been different. As it was, she shuttled back and forth between an awakening sense of reality and a fantasy world in which she was the queen, or at least a princess. She did her best to adapt to both worlds, giving in sullenly to the one and reacting with an imitation graciousness to the other.

To a certain extent, she got along best with the matrons. Their demands were not much different, and often less exacting, than those she'd learned to accept from her mother and teachers. As with them, she bought acceptance with docility or distraction.

The hardest part of it had nothing to do with being in prison; it consisted only of trying to live in a world

made up entirely of women. As she demonstrated with the matrons, she knew, more or less, how to get along with women; but she didn't know how to achieve power over them. And a sense of power was life itself to Betty Jane. The small amount of this which she got from the little group who admired her only served to underline her lack. The sense of power that came from feeling a man tremble in her arms was a fierce craving in her. She translated this desire into something else, thinking that it was men she wanted. She grew more restless and her sleep was filled with dreams in which she was threatened by the bodies of faceless men.

For the rest, she took to the State Farm easily. She was given a job in the office and spent most of her working hours filing cards and records. It was a job that took very little concentration and that she performed with satisfactory mediocrity. The same applied to her classes. She took what she had to and was smart enough to do well without exerting herself.

The idea of prison did not bear on her too heavily. In a way, it was not unlike a school. The girls ranged from thirteen to eighteen and were assigned to dormitories according to age groups. They were all dressed alike, but that also applied to some schools. On the other hand, Betty Jane had always regarded school as a sort of prison, so she was not too conscious of a difference. She had a few admirers, a few enemies, no friends, and she walked alone in the crowd; that, too, was the way it had been in school.

She was allowed visitors once a week, but it was the third week before the matron came to announce that she had one. Her first thought was that it might be the lawyer with some news for her, but even before she arrived at the visiting room she knew it wasn't. She knew before she saw him who it would be. There was only the one person who had consistently turned toward her no matter what happened.

She gazed at Steve Harper with mixed emotions. As when he appeared after her arrest, she was glad to see him. But that was only part of it. The patience on his face, the expression in his eyes—which were so different from desire, with which she knew how to cope—made her angry. He was sure of himself these days and she

didn't like it. In some way, it gave her feelings of guilt and for this she hated him.

"What do you want," she asked as she sat down opposite him.

"Just to see you," he said with a grin. He put a package on the table. "I brought you some things. Cigarettes and candy. And my mother baked some cookies for you."

"Any saws in them?" she asked lightly. She didn't know how to express pleasure and resentment simultaneously and she felt both.

"Mom was just fresh out of saws at the time," he said. "I thought of filling the cigarettes with dynamite but there was always the chance you might forget about it and ruin your lipstick."

"You're a big-time operator," she said in mock admiration.

"The biggest," he agreed solemnly.

But it was a kind of empty kidding and they both knew it. For a moment they were silent, each of them trying to think of something to say.

"How are you getting along?" he asked.

"All right," she said, shrugging. She tried to recapture the lightness. "It's not bad—if you don't care what you say. You might even like it here; there are plenty of girls."

"That's for me," he said, but his heart wasn't in it.

There was another moment of silence and this time she broke it. "What's new?" she asked.

"Nothing much." He shrugged. "In fact, nothing. Your father's still acting the same. He's made your mother get rid of everything in the house that was yours and he acts as if he never had a daughter. Everybody in town thinks he must be a little crazy. They don't know any other reason why he'd act that way."

Betty Jane knew. She knew that when she'd told him she was Mrs. Chalice she had in a way killed him; now he was killing her in return. Strangest of all, she felt neither anger nor hurt; it was as though the denial on both sides had reached such a peak of violence as to make the relationship cease to exist. It left her with an unreal sense of contentment. For the first time, she could hear Steve mention her father and feel as if he were talking about a stranger.

"I think," he said, "that your mother would like to

come and see you or write to you, but that she's afraid to."

The deadness she felt about her father didn't exist with regard to her mother. She experienced a sudden wave of irritation.

"Who needs her?" she said.

"Bett—" he began and hesitated.

"No lectures," she snapped.

"No lectures," he agreed. "I was going to say that you don't understand. I'm not sure I do myself. But your mother has changed a lot since your trial. Everybody's noticed it. I remember what she was like. She always seemed to be whining and complaining about something and nobody could do anything to suit her. She was just kind of wrapped up in herself and feeling sorry for herself. I don't think she ever noticed that other people wanted and needed things. But now she's completely changed."

Betty Jane's anger only grew as she listened. "Big deal," she scoffed.

"My mother," said Steve, "said that she expected her to talk about nothing but what had been done to her by her daughter's arrest, but she's never even once mentioned herself. When she does talk about it, all she does is worry about how you are or if you need anything."

"To hell with her," Betty Jane said.

"I guess I better be going," he said. "I'll be seeing you soon, Bett—with some more loot. Some of the kids have been talking about making up a kind of club to send you things. Maybe we can even bake you a cake with a saw in it. You like chocolate or vanilla saws?"

She refused the clumsily offered bait. "You tell them I don't need their presents," she said. "I've got money of my own. Maybe I'll make up a little Christmas package to distribute among them. And of course something for my dear, sweet mother. You think maybe she'd like some flowers sprinkled with arsenic? For Mother's Day?"

"Sure, Bett," he said soothingly. "I'll be seeing you. On the upbeat."

"I got news for you, buster," she said. Suddenly her rage was gone and she felt exhausted. "In this joint we got nothing but a downbeat. And it's offkey."

She turned away, not even watching him leave. She

was listless as she followed the matron back to her dormitory.

In the beginning, Betty Jane enjoyed the social events in the State Farm. Except for occasionally dancing with one of the other girls, she stayed apart from the others but she got a curious pleasure from watching. A large percentage of the girls were paired off whenever they had the chance. One girl would slick back her hair and leave off make-up, trying to look as masculine as she could. The other would be her "chick" and the relationship would follow the course of any boy and girl. Especially among the younger girls, Betty Jane knew that usually this really amounted to no more than the crushes young girls had on each other. Others, however, represented real lesbian attachments.

She became acutely aware of these, partly through her own curiosity and partly because there was so much talk about them. At night she was often aware of faint scurrying in the hallway of the dormitory and it was Joan Hill who scornfully explained that some of the girls visited each other in their rooms at night after lights were out. She was curious about it, but it held no attraction for her. Occasionally some of the lesbians would make remarks as she passed them, but she ignored them.

Or so it was until one night at a dance. Betty Jane had already danced several times, with Milly King and a couple of other girls. She was sitting off to one side by herself when a slim, black-haired girl came up to her. Betty Jane knew her slightly, mostly because she also worked in the main offices as a secretary to one of the matrons. It was a struggle to remember her name, but Betty Jane succeeded just as the girl reached her. It was Shelley Stone.

"Hi," the girl said.

"Hi," Betty Jane said diffidently. The girl had always seemed nice enough and she saw no reason to be either friendly or unfriendly with her.

"How about dancing?" Shelley Stone asked.

Betty Jane shrugged, not caring one way or the other.

"Come on," the girl urged, taking her by the arm. Rather than argue, Betty Jane let herself be pulled to her feet and out onto the floor.

They'd been dancing for several minutes before she

became aware that Shelley's body was pressed tightly against her own. She found it mildly distasteful and tried to pull away. At the same moment she became conscious of the girl's lips moving softly against her ear.

"Don't be coy, chick," she said.

Betty Jane jerked free. "What's the idea?" she asked.

"You're the idea, chick," the girl said. She was staring intently into Betty Jane's eyes, a little smile on her face. She was keeping her voice low. "You and me. We could have a lot of fun, baby, without anybody ever being the wiser. And I could do you a lot of good through the office."

Then Betty Jane got it. Anger came and with it a sort of panic. "Go to hell," she cried loudly. "And after this keep your hands off me."

Several girls, dancing near them, glanced around, giggling.

The dark-haired girl flushed, her mouth tightening with anger. But instead of answering, she turned and stalked off through the dancers. Betty Jane went back to her chair, trembling. By the time the dance was over, however, she had forgotten all about it and didn't even think of mentioning it to Milly and Joan. There had never been any reference to Shelley Stone as a lesbian, but among so many of them there was no particular novelty in discovering another.

She thought no more about it until several days later. Then, suddenly, with no explanation, she was transferred from her job in the office to the sewing room. The matron there was a sour-faced woman who gave the girls daily quotas and expected them to live up to them. And she was unimpressed by Betty Jane's docility. By the end of the workday, Betty Jane's hands were sore in a dozen places where she had jabbed herself with the needle. She had done almost everything wrong and was close to tears from the matron's lashing remarks.

That night, in her room, she was complaining bitterly to Milly and Joan. "Why the hell did they transfer me?" she demanded. "Nobody's ever complained about the way I did my work in the office."

"Poor kid," Milly said. "I guess you just ran into the breaks. Maybe they needed somebody in the sewing room and some bright character figured if you were good at

filing you'd be good at sewing. Some days it goes like that."

Joan Hill looked up from the magazine she was reading. Since that first day, she and Betty Jane had gotten along under an armed truce that at times was almost friendly. They still sniped at each other, but it never went beyond that, for a mutual grudging respect had grown up as a result of that first encounter. "Breaks," she jeered. "The breaks are a lot of malarkey. When things happen, somebody makes them happen. Who's mad at you?"

"How do I know?" Betty Jane asked sullenly. There were times when she felt that everyone was mad at her, so the question came as no great surprise. "Somebody must be, but I don't know why."

Joan lit a cigarette and stared thoughtfully at the smoke. Betty Jane and Milly watched her anxiously. They had come to accept the fact that she usually knew more than they did about what was going on in the place. Betty Jane would never admit it, but she also knew that Joan was wiser about most things than the other girls. She was no older than they were, but her detached cynicism made Betty Jane's belligerence and Milly's complacence seem childish.

"What about Shelley Stone?" she asked finally.

"What about her?" Betty Jane wanted to know. "And what could she do even if she were mad at me?"

"Plenty," Joan said crisply. "Any reason why she might be sore at you? Maybe she made a pass at you or something?"

Then Betty Jane remembered. "Yeah," she said. "She did. At one of the dances about a month ago."

"And what did you do?"

"What do you think I did?" Betty Jane demanded hotly. "I told her off right on the floor."

"Anybody else hear you?"

"I don't know. Maybe. What difference does it make?"

"Plenty, kid," Joan said. "She's made it real tough for a couple of girls who wouldn't play house with her."

"But what can she do?" Betty Jane cried. "She's just in here like the rest of us. You'd think she was a matron or something the way you talk."

"She might as well be," Joan said. She looked at Betty Jane and laughed. "You're a real babe in the woods, you

are. Didn't that Lance Peru ever tell you anything? Or were you so busy keeping your eyes closed for him that you never learned how to look around?"

"Lay off," Betty Jane said sullenly. "What do you mean?"

"What does Shelley do?"

"She's Miss Dolan's secretary. You mean she could get Miss Dolan to transfer me?"

"Don't be such an innocent," snapped Joan. "That secretary stuff is just for the record. She's Miss Dolan's lover."

Despite everything she knew, Betty Jane was conscious of being shocked. "But—but a matron . . ." she said.

Joan laughed. "Matrons are only women."

"Can't you talk about something else?" Milly asked plaintively. "God, I wish somebody'd smuggle a man in here."

"There are three or four of them among the matrons." Joan went on, ignoring Milly. "Miss Dolan, Miss Haley in the dispensary, Mrs. Bradley in the store . . ."

"*Mrs.* Bradley?" Betty Jane exclaimed.

"Sure. She likes both. She cuddles up with one of the chicks here during the day and then at night she goes home and cuddles up to her husband."

"Miss Haley, too?" Betty Jane said. "You mean the nurse in the dispensary? She looks like such a nice lady."

"She probably is," Joan said. "Even nicer, if you'll let her. You been up there?"

"Once for a couple of aspirin."

Joan sighed. "I guess there isn't much she can do with an aspirin case. But if you ever go up there for anything else, watch yourself, sweetie. You're just her type." She laughed loudly at the dismay on Betty Jane's face.

"You think it was Shelley then?" Betty Jane asked.

"You can bet on it, sweetie. She's a hot-tempered little bitch and if you cut her dead she'd want to get even. In her spot, it's easy. All she'd have to do is bring a little pressure and she could have you transferred any place."

Betty Jane pounded her pillow angrily. "But what can I do about it?" she wailed.

"You could go back and make up to Shelley."

"I'll see her in hell first."

"Okay," Joan grunted, stretching out on her bed.

"There's another way that might work. Have you gone to see the psychologist since you've been here?"

Betty Jane shook her head.

"That one!" snorted Milly. "You know what she tried to tell me? She said that I hated men and that's why I wanted to go to bed with so many of them. How silly can you get?"

"Go to see her," Joan said, ignoring Milly. "Don't say anything about Shelley or even let on that you think somebody got you transferred. Just tell her you were moved and that you liked the old job but don't like this one and you want to know if that's why you're jabbing yourself with the needle so much. Those brain-pushers like to be handed things like that. But also she's no dummy. When she starts digging, she'll find out you were doing all right on the old job and she'll start wondering about why you were transferred. You can bet she knows what's going on and she'll figure it out. She's on the level—as much as anybody is—I'll bet she gets you transferred back."

"You think so?"

"I think so," Joan said gravely. "She won't interfere with the matrons and their fun, but she's done things like this before. It's worth a try anyway. You got nothing to lose."

The lights blinked as a signal that they would go off in another five minutes, and the three girls scurried around getting ready for bed.

"Gee," Milly's voice floated sleepily through the dark, "this would be a great place if they'd only make it co-educational."

Betty Jane and Joan both giggled. Then they settled down to ignoring the occasional sound of bare feet and furtive whispering from the hallway. Sleep came to Betty Jane slowly, as it always did, and that night she dreamed of a battered and bloody Shelley Stone.

The next day, after the work period, Betty Jane went to the psychologist's office and followed Joan's instructions. While she talked, she could see a sheet of paper with her name on it on the psychologist's desk. She was unable to see anything else on it. But it was enough to make her suspicious and she felt the anger rising up in her when at first the psychologist seemed doubtful and

asked her several questions about whether she thought someone had done this deliberately. She choked the anger down, however, and gave a convincing display of surprise. Finally the psychologist dismissed her, telling her that they'd talk again soon.

It was two days later that the psychologist sent for Betty Jane. There was a faint suggestion of grimness about her face that hadn't been there before.

"I'm sorry, Betty Jane," she said, "but your transfer was a mistake. One of those things that will happen when there are so many records, you know."

Betty Jane knew that she was lying, but she smiled sweetly and waited.

"While I am not consulted on all job transfers," the psychologist went on, "I was responsible for a general policy in which girls are not moved from one job to another as long as they are happy and are functioning efficiently—unless, of course, there is an emergency. I find that your work in the office was always good. I have arranged for you to be sent back there."

"Oh, thank you," Betty Jane said in her best little girl manner. "I really wasn't complaining about the sewing, if only I hadn't kept hurting myself . . ."

"Of course," the psychologist said. "If anything like this happens again, please let me know about it, Betty Jane."

"I will and thank you again." Betty Jane turned and started to leave.

"Oh, yes," the psychologist said, "now that we've gotten acquainted, why don't you drop in and see me again soon?"

Betty Jane felt a nameless fear creeping over her. She didn't know why, but she was afraid of this woman. She fought to keep it from showing.

"Why?" she asked.

The psychologist smiled at her. "No special reason," she said. "I'd like to know you better, that's all. That wasn't an order, Betty Jane—just drop in when you feel like it."

"Okay," Betty Jane said. She walked slowly out of the office to keep from bolting.

The next day she was back working at the files. Miss Dolan's office was only two rooms away and she often

saw Shelley Stone. Neither of them ever referred to what had happened. But now Betty Jane was keeping her eyes open. She watched the girl and the matron whenever she had the chance and she began to see the little signs that exist between two people who are emotionally involved. She saw the older woman's expression of possessiveness, the jealousy that flashed across her face when the girl was friendly with someone else—all the little reactions she thought only men had. She was surprised to find that a lesbian often acted like a man, seemed just as responsive to every move of the girl's body. She often thought about this, lying alone in her bed late at night.

But her thoughts were busy with other things too. Getting her job back hadn't been enough. She couldn't think of the incident or of Shelley Stone without burning with rage. She thought frequently about what she would like to do to Shelley, and she kept an eye out for her opportunity. She finally got it about a month later.

It was so simple she almost didn't see it. She had been sent to Miss Dolan's office with a sheaf of records. There was no one in the room and looking out the window she saw the matron and Shelley walking across the grounds away from the building. She turned to put the records down on the desk, and saw that it was covered with mail which Shelley would later distribute among the girls. It had already passed the censorship office and the envelopes were slit open. Betty Jane tried moving some of the mail to one side to make room for the reports.

Even so she might have done nothing if there hadn't been a letter addressed to her on top of the heap. She could tell by the handwriting that it was the fifty dollars she received every week. Acting on a sudden impulse, she flipped open the envelope and slid the fifty dollars out. Then the idea came to her full-blown.

She went to the door and looked out. The corridor was empty. She scurried back to the desk and began going through the letters. She came across one addressed to Milly King in which there were two single dollar bills. She slipped them out and went on pawing through the mail, taking quick peeks inside each envelope. She found two more letters with cash and one with a check. She put these in her pocket along with her own money and Milly's.

Her heart was pounding wildly as she slipped out of the office and went back to her own section. Before going to her room she stopped at the lavatory, and lingering until she was alone, she burnt the check and the other girls' money and flushed the ashes down the drain. Her own fifty dollars she kept, knowing that if any questions were asked, she could claim she had saved it from last week. Then she went on to her room.

It was the middle of the afternoon and the girls were back in the dormitory for a rest period between classes. Joan was sprawled across her bed, reading a magazine. Milly was curled up, doing her nails. Betty Jane tried to look relaxed as she lay on her bed, but she was so jittery she was breathing in short gasps. Her body jerked spasmodically when a rap finally sounded on the door.

"Mail," Shelley announced outside.

"I'll get it," Milly said, bounding off her bed. She went to the door and took the letters from the dark-haired girl, closing the door with her foot as she glanced at them.

"Looks like a love letter for you," she announced, flipping one of the letters to Joan. The blonde caught it.

"Something for you, my deah," Milly said to Betty Jane, holding up an envelope. "Looks like your weekly dividend money. Wish I could get fifty bucks a week for just sitting on my kiester in this joint."

"There's never anything in it but money," Betty Jane said, forcing herself to be casual. "Take out the money and toss it to me."

"You mean I can touch it? Gee!" Milly fished around inside the envelope, then peered into it. "Honey, I hate to be the one to break the news to you, but I think you've just been taken off the payroll. There ain't no scratch in here."

"What? Let me see."

"Maybe he wrote an explanation," Milly said, scaling the envelope across the room. She turned to her own letter.

Trying to look surprised and shocked, Betty Jane pulled the blank sheet of paper from the envelope and shook it in the air.

"Hey, wait a minute," Milly yelped. "My mother said she was putting two bucks in here for me. Where the

hell is it?" She searched frantically through the envelope, looked around on the floor.

"There's nothing in here but a sheet of paper," Betty Jane said excitedly. "Besides, it's part of my money. They wouldn't dare stop sending it. It must have been in here. Something happened to it."

By this time, they had Joan's attention.

"My old lady is a bitch on wheels," Milly said, "but if she said she was putting in two bucks for me, you can be damn sure she did. Somebody's been tapping the till."

The three girls stared at each other. Betty Jane waited for one of the others to say it.

"That Shelley," Milly finally said.

"Oh, no, she wouldn't do that," Betty Jane protested. She paused. "Would she?"

"Why not?" Joan asked. "You think she's just in here because she wanted a vacation? You're sure you didn't drop your dough on the floor?"

"It's not there," Milly said indignantly.

"You can see for yourself," Betty Jane added.

"If Shelley did it, she must be pretty damn sure Miss Dolan will back her up," Joan said. She sighed. "That's the trouble with going to jail. You have to associate with all kinds of dishonest people."

"Well, I'm going to do something about it," Milly declared. The big redhead started for the door. "I'll make her earn my two bucks."

"Wait a minute," Joan said sharply.

Betty Jane watched the blonde narrowly, trying to guess what she was thinking. Her heart was pounding so hard she wondered if the others could hear it.

"You think I should just let her walk away with my money?" Milly demanded.

"No, but use your head," Joan snapped. "Wait'll she's finished delivering the mail in this dormitory. Then we'll check around among the other girls."

"Why?"

"If the matron's going to cover up for her some way, then maybe she's going to try to make a big haul. We'll see if anything else has been taken. You can be sure that if Dolan is protecting her, there won't be any point in making a squawk through channels."

"I'll make my own squawk," Milly said grimly. "I'll

make that bitch think she's been going to bed with a buzz saw."

"Use your head, sweetie," Joan said. "If she's being protected all you'll get is a long trip over to the correction dormitory. But if she did clip the other girls maybe something can be cooked up so that she'll get her lumps and nobody'll have to take the rap for it."

"You mean we'll gang her?"

"Something like that—so just keep your pants on, sweetie."

The three girls waited—Joan calmly, Milly angrily, and Betty Jane in a nervous sweat. But as they waited, she grew calmer, more sure of herself. She was beginning to feel elated when Joan finally nodded that it was time for them to go.

It didn't take them long to discover the other three girls who were also missing cash. The power of suggestion produced still others, girls who thought they should have had money in their letters and found it easy to believe that it had been there and had been stolen. The word of what had happened spread quickly that afternoon, leaping from room to room and dormitory to dormitory. The list of victims grew staggeringly. Girls who had never received any money from their parents began to believe that this time the miracle had happened only to be destroyed by Shelley Stone. All of their bitterness and anger over constant rejection began to focus on her. Little knots of girls gathered everywhere to talk excitedly.

There is one thing which everyone in prison has in common. That is a lack of privacy. So terrible is this—beyond the ability of the free citizen even to imagine—that the few privacies left are hoarded as some men hoard gold. It was this tiny sense of remaining privacy that was outraged by the missing money. The money itself was important, but still more important was the fact that someone dared to take it. Betty Jane had sown better than she knew.

By evening, when the girls marched into the dining room for supper, the tension was a tangible thing. Even the matrons felt it, as was evidenced by the fact that they suddenly became more vigilant, but they had no

idea where it was coming from or what direction it might take.

Betty Jane, taking her regular place at one of the big tables, felt it too, and she was almost shivering with excitement. She had no idea what might happen—nor did anyone, for nothing had really been organized—but she was certain that something would. She tried to keep her gaze riveted on Shelley Stone who sat three tables away from her.

Usually mealtime was filled with the steady hum of girls in low-voiced conversation. But tonight the only sound in the huge room was the scrape of chairs as the girls sat down. The very silence was more threatening than any display of anger might have been. It was the silence of mass violence waiting to be triggered.

Then it happened. Sitting across from Shelley Stone was one of the girls who imagined that she had lost money. She did not start eating when she took her seat, but sat there glaring at the dark-haired girl. Her face was working nervously. Suddenly she picked up her bowl of soup and threw it straight in Shelley Stone's face.

The place erupted as though every girl present had been jerked by a string attached to the bowl of soup. A combined shriek tore out of hundreds of throats. Food and dishes flew through the air, chairs and tables crashed to the floor.

Betty Jane saw a flying bowl strike Shelley Stone's cheek, and then the dark red smear spreading over her face. There was a surge of movement as the nearest girls tried to get at her. The hands appeared to be reaching from all angles and they all seemed to attain their goal at the same time. One minute Shelley stood there in her denim dress, cowering away from the clutching fingers; then, so quickly that it seemed like magic, every stitch of clothes had been ripped from her body. Her straight, lithe form, with firm little breasts, stood out among the denim of the other girls as though spotlighted.

The tableau remained unchanged for one gripping second of paralysis. Then the white body burst into movement as Shelley started to run. It seemed impossible that she could run through that mass of clawing, screaming girls, yet she did. There were so many of them that

they got in the way of each other and the naked figure darted between struggling groups.

Once Betty Jane saw her go down, but the next minute she was up and running, a jagged red weal across her back where before there had been only creamy whiteness.

From the sides of the room, the matrons had tried to step in and stem the tide of violence. But they were only a few women against hundreds; their voices were lost in the roar and their bodies bounced ineffectually off the wall of seething flesh. Then, slowly, they began to group together and make their way along the wall toward the door.

Betty Jane saw one of the matrons—she couldn't see who it was—dart out and throw an arm around the naked girl. She was drawn into the cluster of matrons. Before anyone could move to stop them, the group, with Shelley Stone in their midst, swept out through the door and was gone. Several girls threw themselves against the door, but it was already locked from the outside.

Being robbed of their prey seemed only to incite the girls to greater violence. All over the room, girls turned against each other, groups against groups. Old scores were settled by some, while others fought for the sake of fighting, not knowing or caring whom they struck down. Most of the violence was committed by fists and hands, although here and there the table utensils flew and blood was drawn. Chairs and tables were splintered and the crash of glass punctuated the screams.

Somebody threw a chair that crashed against Betty Jane's shoulder, knocking her across the floor. She was hardly aware of the pain as she leaped back to her feet, screaming her rage and defiance with the others. She fought joyously against whoever was at hand. She reached out and ripped the back of a girl's dress and as the girl swung around she raked her nails down across an unfamiliar face. The sight of the crimson lines blooming so suddenly against the white skin gave her a stab of pleasure that penetrated all the way to her loins.

The fighting seemed to go on by its own momentum and time lost all meaning. Betty Jane was constantly in the thick of it, screaming and cursing and scratching and kicking, with all sense of reality gone. She had no idea how much time went by or whether it would ever end.

Actually it was only a little less than three hours before the state troopers, summoned by the superintendent, arrived. They threw open the doors and came marching in with tear gas guns.

But the girls were already through, waiting only for the trigger that would stop them as it had set them off. At the sight of the men, they ceased fighting and began shouting. Some laughed hysterically. But there was no menace in the wave of sound and the troopers lowered their guns.

Without being told, the girls obediently formed into columns and marched out of the dining room. Considering the violence of the riot, the amount of damage was slight. There were four girls wounded so badly they couldn't walk out, but a few days in the hospital would soon fix them up. The other girls sported a wide variety of scratches and bruises, but most of those could be treated with band-aides and mercurochrome in their own rooms.

Outside, the matrons and troopers began herding the girls back to their dormitories. The matrons knew there was no point in trying to discover who had started the riot; as for what had happened in the dining room, there really was no one person responsible. If it hadn't been the girl who threw the soup, it would have been someone else. To trace the riot back, through the growing tension of the afternoon, to Betty Jane would have been almost impossible even if they had known where to start.

The matrons made no attempt to question any of the girls. They merely sorted out the few who obviously needed medical attention and announced that everyone would be confined to the dormitories until further notice.

On the way back to her room, Betty Jane was suddenly aware of an exhaustion so great she could hardly push one foot ahead of the other. Her shoulder hurt and she had difficulty in raising her arm. All she wanted to do was curl up and sleep, yet the announcement that they would be confined to the dormitories whipped up some remnant of anger within her. Suddenly it seemed that the whole thing was a move against her, as though they already suspected her of having started the riot and had settled on this punishment. In her half-dazed state, it

seemed monstrously unfair. She had a frantic desire to run, but she knew there was no place to run to.

She reached the dormitory and started to enter past the grim-faced matron. She staggered against the door—hardly aware that she was acting. She clutched at her shoulder and started to slump, only to pull herself erect. She turned to the matron.

"I think," she said with controlled evenness, "that my shoulder is badly hurt. Someone hit me with a chair right in the beginning and I was out most of the time."

The matron noticed her pale, drawn face. There was no way she could know that the agony she saw came from inner turmoil and not physical injury. Her face softened slightly.

"All right, Betty Jane," she said. "Go on up to the dispensary. Be sure to come back unless Miss Haley says you have to stay there."

"Thank you," Betty Jane murmured. She turned and walked weakly away.

She was almost overcome with the need to get away from the dormitory. Somehow the prospect of facing Milly and Joan, of being locked up in the rambling building, was more than she could bear. Anything, she though, would be better.

At first, when she had marched out of the dining room, she had felt cleansed of all hatred for Shelley Stone. But now she found herself thinking once more of the power that Shelley wielded; she remembered the way the girl had been rescued—pulled into the group of matrons and sheltered. These were both things that Betty Jane had always wanted, and now wanted more than ever before: to have power and the safety that went with it, to be sheltered from the others in this world in which she was locked. She hated Shelley Stone for having all the things she didn't have.

Up in the dispensary, she had to wait for several minutes before the door opened and the nurse beckoned to her. She went in and faced Miss Haley, a heavy-set woman in her middle thirties, with a half-soft, half-strong face and strange, probing eyes.

The nurse watched her as she tottered across the room to a chair. Betty Jane was aware of this and suddenly she remembered what Joan had said about this Miss

Haley. She became conscious at the same time of the swinging movement of her own hips beneath the coarse denim dress.

"What's the matter with you?" the nurse asked, standing in front of her.

"My shoulder hurts," Betty Jane said, her left hand covering it protectively. Then, with only the barest of pause, and without knowing why, she went on: "And across here too." She drew her hand down over her right breast.

"Well, if you will fight like a bunch of alley cats," the nurse said with rough good humor. "Let me see it."

Betty Jane unfastened her dress and slipped it off her shoulder. She reached around and unsnapped her brassiere, letting it slide down from her breast. She was aware of a sudden excitement that made her fingers tremble.

She was staring at the floor, but she risked one lightning glance upward from beneath her lashes. She thought she saw a change of expression flit across the nurse's face, but she couldn't be sure.

Then the woman's strong fingers were digging into her shoulder and it did hurt. She winced and bit her lip.

"There?" the nurse asked.

Betty Jane nodded.

"Nothing serious," Miss Haley said briskly. "Just a minor bruise. Now where does it hurt here?" Her hand moved down over Betty Jane's breast and it seemed that her touch grew lighter.

Betty Jane caught her breath sharply and let her head fall back, her eyes closing.

"You were just making that part up, weren't you?" the nurse asked. Her tone was amused.

Betty Jane nodded without opening her eyes. "I guess so," she admitted. "Although it does feel funny—now."

There was a moment of silence in the room. The nurse said nothing, but Betty Jane could sense her standing there, only a couple of feet away. The silence stretched until it became unbearable. Betty Jane lifted her eyelids enough to peer from beneath them. The nurse was looking at her and Betty Jane recognized the expression in her eyes.

She knew she had won.

CHAPTER 13

For a while Betty Jane was almost content. It was soon arranged for her to work in the dispensary instead of the office. Although she still slept in the dormitory room with Milly King and Joan Hill, most of her waking time was spent with Charlotte Haley. The work was easy and carried with it some of the excitement of the illicit romance. The nurse was possessive and protective, and Betty Jane felt more sheltered and wanted than at any time in her life. Then, too, she experienced practically no disapproval. Her new status was quickly known throughout the dormitories, but for the most part the girls accepted it as a fact of institution life; they neither applauded nor condemned.

Betty Jane's body regained its old arrogance and there were days at a time when she forgot to be sorry for herself. Anger seldom plagued her for when it did she could use her new relationship to express it. Steve Harper still came to see her every two weeks, but his presence no longer infuriated her. Only references to her mother could stir up the old resentment. She was friendly to Steve but his attitude was still one of watchful waiting.

Yet it was a fragile sort of contentment, as it had to be. Love between people of the same sex is a dead-end street, and it arrives quickly at a spot from which there is no place to go. But this love had still other confinements; it tried to flourish between two people who in some ways had never grown up and in others had never been young. It existed between an older woman who searched for humiliation and a younger girl who knew instinctively how to provide it. As an end in itself, such a lopsided relationship would never be enough.

Accordingly, after a few months, Betty Jane grew restless again. In prison there were no bigger worlds to conquer and she thought more and more of getting out. She had long before given up hope of hearing from the lawyer, but now the hope returned to plague her. Her old dream—where she tumbled endlessly down the stairs—came back almost nightly. She thought of the money that

was being saved for her on the outside and what she could do with it. Sometimes at night she would talk about it to Milly and Joan, pacing the floor of their room like a caged cat. The two girls never fully believed in it, despite the slight evidence of the fifty dollars that continued to arrive every week, but to some degree they shared in the pleasure of the fantasy.

There were other nights when the three of them talked in low voices about escaping from the State Farm. There was never much reality in this talk, for none of them had any idea how it might be accomplished. It usually ended with Milly and Joan demanding to know why the Syndicate didn't rescue Betty Jane if she stood in so well with them. Betty Jane would go sullenly to bed, wondering the same thing. The next day she would be listless and would spend hours trying to trap Charlotte Haley into some display of emotion in front of the girls.

Then came the event which seemed from the beginning to promise something big and exciting. Betty Jane had now been at the State Farm for almost a year. During that time Joan Hill had received few letters from the outside and no visitors. It was something to which Betty Jane and Milly never referred, for while Joan pretended indifference they suspected she felt otherwise. Even when they were fighting with her, this was the one thing with which they never taunted her.

But one visiting day the matron arrived to announce that there was a visitor for Joan. No one looked more surprised than the little blonde herself. An air of excitement took over the room, with Betty Jane and Milly feeling it as much as Joan. They hovered around her as she combed her hair and Betty Jane even offered her own lipstick, an act of generosity which was equally a miracle.

When Joan returned her face and eyes were flushed from an inner excitement, but she refused to answer any of the girls' eager questions.

"It was somebody," was all she would say. She sprawled on her bed, retreating behind a magazine and refusing to look up as they continued with their questions. But it was obvious that she wasn't reading. There was a far-away expression on her face. The two girls finally gave up in sullen frustration.

It wasn't until they were back in their room after supper that Joan finally showed signs of once more admitting their existence. Milly had picked up a confession magazine and doggedly began reading it. This was always a trial, for Milly insisted on commenting aloud over each scene of passion or seduction. Betty Jane was lying on her stomach across her own bed, lost in another of her fantasies of what she would do when she got out. She was trying to decide between a mink and a sable coat and had just about decided to take both.

"Want to listen to something?" Joan asked casually.

Milly put down her confession magazine with alacrity. "I was thinking," she said languidly, "of running out to the hairdressers, but I guess I can spare you a minute."

Joan grinned at her.

Betty Jane was slower in pulling out of her fantasy. She reluctantly postponed the decision between mink and sable and looked up.

"This guy who came to see me this afternoon," Joan said.

"It *was* a man!" squealed Milly. "I knew it. Tell me, are they still making them the same way?"

"I don't know," Joan said drily. "I didn't make this one."

"Isn't she a riot?" demanded Milly. "But I know how it is. It's those damn iron bars that run across the center of the table between you and the visitor. You'd think a smart guy would figure out how to overcome a little thing like that."

"Iron bars do not a prison make," Joan said, "but they make a hell of a good chastity belt."

Even Betty Jane grinned. "Well, what about this man, Joan?"

"I'll have to go back to something else—to how I got sent up here," Joan said. This was another surprise for she never talked about herself. They knew the charge on which she'd been committed, but that was all. "There was a guy who pulled the jobs with me. His name was John Rogers. . . . Don't either of you ever say anything about what I'm telling you," she added fiercely.

"Cross my heart," said Milly.

Betty Jane nodded her agreement.

"We were both caught at the same time," Joan said.

"He was older than me and they sent him to Sing Sing. We had one little chance to talk together during the trial, but that was all. We agreed that we wouldn't try to write to each other because we didn't want the cops to connect us. But John said he was going to do his best to get out and he'd try to get me out too."

"And he's out?" yelped Milly. "That's who came to see you today?"

Joan shook her head. "He's still doing his time. But a friend of his just got out and came to see me."

"So what's such a big deal about that?" Betty Jane asked.

"Well," Joan said casually, "how would you like to crash out of this dump?"

"Are you kidding?" Betty Jane asked tensely.

Joan grinned tightly. "No," she said.

"You mean really outside?" Milly wanted to know. "What I wouldn't give for just one night out of here. Boy, would I make time."

"Shut up," Betty Jane said tersely. "This guy who came to see you—he says he can get us out?"

Joan nodded.

"Who is he?"

"I can't tell you," Joan said. "I promised him that I wouldn't mention his name to anyone. He just got out of stir and he doesn't want to go in again. But he came from John and the whole thing is straight."

"All three of us?" Betty Jane asked.

"Yes," Joan said, but she seemed to hesitate.

"What's the angle?" Betty Jane demanded furiously. "There's something wrong or you'd be looking happier about it. There's an angle in it somewhere. What's he want out of it?"

"Nothing," Joan said. She lit a new cigarette from the old one and snuffed the butt out in the ashtray. "I'll level with you, but you got to level with me too. All this stuff you've been giving us for a year, Betty Jane, about having dough. Is it true?"

"It's true, but what's that got to do with it? I'll pay to get out—but not too much." Betty Jane was growing suspicious.

"It won't really be much," Joan said. "Actually, it doesn't mean touching the money you've got outside. . . .

You see, he came here only to offer to help me get out. I talked him into agreeing to help you and Milly too."

"Why?" Betty Jane asked. "Why are you being so big-hearted?"

"Because it's the only way I can get out," Joan said simply. "This guy doesn't want anything himself, but he has to make a fix. That'll take a little money. He doesn't have any and John didn't have any to send. He said it would cost me fifty bucks to get out. I don't have fifty bucks."

"So?"

"So I talked him into getting all three of us out. That will cost a hundred and fifty bucks. You put up the money, Betty Jane, and you get out too."

"I'll do it," said Betty Jane. "Maybe. How does it work and when?"

"He's coming back to see me next week. To get our answer. Then as soon as we have the hundred and fifty dollars, he'll go to work. I don't know how he's going to get us out, but it'll have to be one at a time. Maybe one on one day, the second the next day, the last one on the third day. He's got a way—that's what the fifty bucks goes for—and he'll meet us on the outside and take us into New York. After that, we're on our own."

"The way out might be stopped when they discover the first one gone," Betty Jane said shrewdly. She glanced up with a challenge in her eyes. "I have to be the first one."

Joan sighed. "That's only fair," she admitted. "You put up the money for all three of us and you can go first."

"I can just not buy anything out of my allowance," Betty Jane said rapidly, "and I'll have the money in three weeks. Three weeks." She sat up and hugged her knees. "Three weeks. I can't believe it."

"You come across with the cash and you'll be able to believe it all right," Joan said.

"What'll you do when you get out, Joan?" Milly asked excitedly.

"Go somewhere and wait," Joan said. "He says he'll help John to crash out too. So I'll just hole up somewhere until then."

"You know what I'm going to do?" Betty Jane asked.

She was talking to herself more than to them. "I've got almost a hundred thousand dollars by now. I'm going to Mexico or Europe or somewhere and I'm going to start living on Easy Street. And nobody's going to stop me," she added fiercely.

"Nobody around here is going to try to, sweetie," Joan said. "You just produce the hundred and fifty and nobody cares if you've got a million after that."

"Three weeks," Betty Jane said softly as the lights blinked their warning. She curled up on her bed, hugging the pillow.

The three weeks passed in a kind of delirium. Joan's visitor came again and she announced that everything was ready, awaiting only the delivery of the money. Betty Jane walked about in a state of ecstasy. She hoarded her money as it arrived, forcing Charlotte Haley to provide her with the few things she needed. Since her new mood left no room for unkindness, the nurse was more than happy to do so.

Despite the dragging of each day, the three weeks were finally up and Betty Jane handed over the hundred and fifty dollars to Joan. On visiting day Joan, showing the tension they all felt, returned to the room.

"It's all set," she said. "You'll go tomorrow, Betty Jane."

"How?" Betty Jane asked.

"Listen carefully," Joan said. "I don't want you to forget and have to come around asking me. From now on we should try to have less to say to each other when we're out of this room than we usually do. I don't want anyone remembering that we seemed to have secrets just before you got out."

"Okay, okay," Betty Jane said impatiently.

"You know where they deliver the bread every day in back of the kitchens?" Joan asked.

Betty Jane nodded.

"Okay, then. The guy delivers bread at ten tomorrow morning. It'll be easy for you to get out of the dispensary and be over there. Hang around, but don't do anything that'll look suspicious. There's practically never anyone there, but you never know who'll see you. Have you seen the basket he brings the bread in?"

"No."

"Well, it's a big covered basket, longer than you are. He backs up to the kitchens and opens the truck. One of the girls usually comes out and helps him carry the basket inside. The bread is taken out and he brings the basket back to the truck empty. One of the girls nearly always follows him out simply because he's a man to talk to. Tomorrow, he will put the empty basket back in the truck, but won't close the truck doors. He'll find some excuse to step back into the kitchen for a minute. If a girl followed him out, she'll follow him back in. Then you jump into the truck and get inside the basket. Be sure to put the lid down once you're in. The driver will come back out, close the truck doors and drive off. Got it?"

Betty Jane nodded, her eyes sparkling. "What about the gate?" she asked.

"The guy always stops at the gate and somebody takes a look in the back of his truck. But they never examine the basket. The driver swears to that. When he drives through the gate, you'll be able to tell. Get out of the basket and be ready to move quickly. About five blocks from here, the driver takes a short cut through an undeveloped section to get back to his bakery. He says you can tell when he hits the spot because the street is rough as hell. He'll be flagged down on that street by this guy who'll want some information. When the truck stops, you open the back door and get out quick. You'll find that the truck has stopped with the rear end right beside a black sedan. Open the rear door of the sedan, get inside and lie down on the floor. There'll be a blanket to pull over you. Stay there and keep your mouth shut until the guy says you can get up. You sure you got it?"

"Yeah," Betty Jane said. She felt as if there were a great weight on her chest, restricting her breathing.

"Repeat it back to me," Joan commanded.

Betty Jane did so.

"Okay," Joan said. "Now, no more talking abou it at all—not even in here. And good luck, sweetie."

"I'll make it," Betty Jane said. "I know I will."

"You'd better," Joan said grimly, "because if you don't, we won't. We're to go out later, after the excitement over your getaway dies down. I can't tell you how, but this

guy has it all figured out. And he'll let us know when the time comes. It's safer that way, he says."

The next twenty-four hours were like a dream to Betty Jane. She walked among the other inmates of the State Farm, but she certainly was not of them. She heard practically nothing that was said to her and looked at everybody as though they were merely a screen through which she was seeing something pleasant.

The next morning, a few minutes before ten, she asked Miss Haley if she could go out.

"I don't know," the nurse said crossly. Betty Jane had been acting as if she didn't exist and she was in bad temper. "This is our busiest time. Can't you wait until later?"

Sudden panic seized Betty Jane at this unexpected response. She and the nurse were alone in the examination room. She went up to her and put her fingers lightly on the woman's arm.

"Please," she said. "I'm sorry I've seemed to be dreaming this morning. I didn't want to tell you, but I have a surprise for you. That's why I want to leave for a few minutes."

"You're a vixen," grumbled the nurse, but she was already feeling better. "All right. Go ahead."

"Thank you," Betty Jane said. She walked through the door.

Down on the grounds, she tried to give the appearance of strolling aimlessly while still heading in the direction of the kitchens. There were a number of other girls and matrons around, but they were accustomed to seeing her running errands for Miss Haley and no one paid any particular attention. Reaching the kitchens, she cut around to the rear of the building.

The bread truck was already there, backed up to the door. The driver and one of the girls were just disappearing inside with the huge basket between them. There was no one else in sight.

With an effort, Betty Jane slowed down her walk until she was barely moving. She knew she couldn't just hang around the truck and she hoped she was timing herself right. She was still fifty yards away when the driver reappeared with the basket. He tossed it into the rear of the truck. The girl had followed him back and was lean-

ing against the door sill. The driver said something to her in an undertone and they both laughed. He turned and went back into the kitchen. Betty Jane caught the gesture of his hand as he passed the girl and heard her laugh in response. They both vanished from sight.

Betty Jane crossed the remaining few yards rapidly. Her heart was pounding so loudly she thought it might give the alarm. But there was still no one in sight as she clambered into the back of the truck. She got quickly into the basket, doubling up on her side, and pulled the lid down. There was something calming about the smell of warm bread which still clung to the basket.

After a short wait, she heard the driver approach the vehicle. The doors slammed and a moment later the truck lurched forward.

It soon stopped again and she knew they were at the gates. She heard the murmur of voices and then the sound of the truck doors being opened. She held her breath, squeezing her eyes tightly shut as though it were a magic gesture which would keep anyone from seeing her even if they lifted the basket lid.

The doors clanged shut. "All right," she heard the matron shout.

"One of these days," the driver shouted back, "I'm going to bring out a whole basketful of the prettiest ones just for myself."

"Men," snorted the matron. But the rest of her words were drowned by the rising motor.

Betty Jane waited a few minutes, then climbed out of the basket. She glanced toward the front of the compartment, but there were no little windows through into the cab. She examined the rear door and saw, with relief, that the latch could be lifted from the inside. She crouched down beside it and waited.

She had no way of judging the time, but it seemed to her that the ride was never going to end when suddenly the truck slowed and began to bounce over a rough street. She was now in an agony of impatience.

The truck stopped. She waited a heartbeat to be certain it wasn't a false stop. Then she carefully lifted the latch and pushed the door open. She saw the stretch of unpaved street, flat fields on either side with stakes marking the

new subdivisions. A black sedan was drawn up beside the truck, only inches away.

She dropped to the ground and closed the door behind her. She could hear the rumble of voices from the front of the truck, although she could not make out any of the words. She couldn't see anyone. She opened the back door of the sedan and crept inside. She shut the door, wincing as it slammed. There was a blanket on the seat. She pulled this down over her as she crouched on the floor.

A moment later the front door of the sedan opened and the body tilted from the weight of a man. The door slammed. She could hear the truck driving away. The starter of the car whined and the motor caught with a roar. The driver jazzed the motor a couple of times, then the sedan began to roll.

Again she had no idea how long they drove. She knew only that her knees and arms were getting sore from jouncing against the floor of the car. Then it stopped.

"Okay, honey," a man's voice said. "You can climb up in the front seat now."

There was something familiar about the voice. She threw off the blanket and got stiffly to her knees. The man was staring straight ahead and all she could see at first was his head with the close-cropped blond hair. She began to climb over the back of the front seat, keeping her eyes fastened on him. The face slid into view. It was Eddie Hamill.

"Eddie," she cried. "You!"

"Me," he said. He put the car into gear and started up again as she slipped down beside him. "How are you, baby?"

"But I—when did you—"

He guessed what she wanted to ask. "I got out about six weeks ago," he said. "I served the balance of my original sentence and that's all there was to it. The slate's clean—up to now."

Betty Jane realized there was a new hardness about Eddie. She didn't understand it and it put a nervous note in her voice as she laughed. "This is good," she said. "So you're the guy who came to help Joan crack out. When she rung two others in on it, did you know one of them was going to me?"

"You got it all wrong, baby," he said. "I'm the guy who came to crack *you* out. That other blonde babe and her friend can stay in there till hell freezes over for all I care. This one crack-out is all there's going to be on my dough."

"Your dough!" she flashed back. "That was my hundred and fifty bucks."

"Chicken feed, baby. It cost me five hundred for that bakery guy. Your dough just gave me some of it back."

Everything had been happening too fast, but Betty Jane was beginning to think it through. "If you were just coming to get me out," she said, "why didn't you get in touch with me instead of Joan? Why all that phony stuff about coming from her boy friend?"

"It wasn't all phony," he said. "John Rogers was my cellmate. He told me all about his babe at State Farm and asked me to go see her and to do anything for her I could. I knew you were at State Farm—we get all the news in Sing Sing too. So I told him I would, figuring there might be an angle in it. When I got out, I nosed around for news about you. I found out you were right in with his babe. It was perfect. I knew if I got in touch with you, you might get suspicious. You were always smart, baby. So I got in touch with her and gave her the story. I knew she probably wouldn't have any dough and I heard you were getting fifty bucks a week. So I made with the bait. If she hadn't suggested letting you in on the crack-out, I would have given her the idea. But I didn't have to. I only took one chance and that was gambling on your smartness. I figured you'd be smart enough to see that you were the first one out since it was your dough. You were always pretty good at looking after yourself."

She could no longer hide from herself the unfriendly tone in his voice. "Why, Eddie?" she cried.

"You're smart. You ought to be able to guess . . . I got a score to settle with you. And I'm going to do it today. You've come to the end of the line, baby."

For the first time she noticed that they were driving along a deserted country road, with not a house in sight.

She fought against the rising tide of fear that threatened to engulf her. "What score, Eddie?" The words stuck in her throat.

"Don't tell me you don't remember, you double-crossing, lousy bitch!" His voice had thickened and his big hands were clamped so tightly to the steering wheel that the knuckles were white. "I've been thinking about it every day for the last year and a half. The minute I get out, I kept promising myself, I'll get that double-crossing bitch."

"You got it all wrong, Eddie," she cried.

"Have I?" he said. He laughed, but there was no mirth in his voice. "Maybe you've forgotten, baby, that it was you who persuaded me not to check our business with the Syndicate and then told Lance Peru that you tried to make me check with them. Maybe you've forgotten how you walked out with Lance Peru and then set me up in a frame for the parole cops."

"You got it all wrong," she cried again. "I only said that to Lance because I was scared of him. It wasn't me that framed you with the girl. Can't you see—it was Lance, because he wanted me and had to get you out of the way? When I tried to stop him, he beat me."

"Sure," Eddie said grimly, but she thought she caught a flicker of uncertainty in his tone. He kept his gaze glued to the road ahead.

"Eddie," she cried hysterically, "stop the car!"

Perhaps it was the force of her words that made the old habit reassert itself, for he stopped immediately.

"Look at me, Eddie," she said.

He turned to look at her, his mouth still a gash of hatred across his face.

For Betty Jane it was a moment of pure terror. This man, who had once been a minor punk in the rackets, had become a killer. And it was at least partly her doing. She had helped make him what he was.

Desperately she thought back to the old days, when she had held him in the palm of her hand—when he trembled at her very touch and would do anything she asked. Did the old power still work? Or had Eddie become so hard, a woman could no longer reach him? After all, it was only a year and a half ago, and he'd spent most of that time in prison—away from women.

She realized this was the supreme gamble of her life, for her life itself was at stake.

"Eddie," she mumured brokenly, and put all the desire she could simulate into the word.

She leaned forward until the institution denim was stretched taut across her full breasts. Her eyes, inches from his face, were wide-open and innocent, just beginning to glisten with tears. She licked her dry lips until they gleamed wetly.

"Eddie!" — there was a sob in her voice now — "Don't you understand? I've never stopped loving you. Even when I made that awful mistake and walked out with Lance. I paid for it, believe me. You'll never know what I went through. He made me his woman, but he treated me like—like something off the streets. You must have read about my trial. It all came out then—the things he forced me to do."

Eddie was watching her closely, his eyes veiled. But the hate was retreating from his mouth.

"Look," she rushed on, hysterically, her hands clawing at her dress. She ripped it open, and dragged it down off her shoulders. "You can still see the scars. . . ."

She shut her eyes tight as if in remembered agony. There were no scars, of course, but Betty Jane counted on his attention being sufficiently distracted to forget about them. She brushed her finger tips across her exposed body, as if in a futile gesture to protect it. Then slowly she opened her eyes and looked directly into his.

"Eddie, I swear to you," she spoke in a low, controlled voice, "that I've never stopped wanting you since the day I left you. If you don't believe that, kill me now." She saw his mouth moving soundlessly, and the hand he raised toward it trembled.

In a sudden burst of exultation, Betty Jane realized that she was going to win—to go on living! The power still worked! She leaned toward him. "Oh, Eddie," she cried fiercely, "I've missed you so much!"

His right arm reached out awkwardly and pulled her closer. She pressed against him, lifting her hands to stroke him. "Eddie," she whispered, "you'll never know how I missed you. Every day I thought and ached for you. It's been hell without you, Eddie. . . ."

He was fighting a losing battle, but he didn't seem to care. He bent his head to her, his lips seeking hungrily.

"Love me, Eddie," she whispered with her lips against his. "Love me. . . ."

Later, he patted her head in the way he had when they first lived together. "I'm sorry, honey," he said. "I kept thinking it was you and I was so crazy about you it almost drove me off my rocker. All I could think of was you walking out of the door with Lance and I guess it just never occurred to me that it was all his doing."

"He was terrible," she said. Triumph had made her giddy, but she knew she would have to hide it as long as she was with him. "I was glad when he was killed." She pulled her tattered dress across her chest and laughed. "Now, you'll have to buy me some clothes."

"We'll drive right into town," he said, starting the car again. "You tell me the sizes and stay out of sight in the car while I get the stuff."

He turned around on the country road and drove back the way they had come. When they neared the town, Betty Jane got in the back under the blanket again. Eddie Hamill stopped at the first store he saw and bought the clothes she'd listed for him. Then he drove back into the country where she put them on. She threw the prison uniform into the brush.

"Now, we got to get away from here, honey," he said. "You're going to be hotter than a ten-dollar match. I'm not carrying much dough, but I can pull a job and we'll get as far away from here as we can."

Betty Jane eyed him with speculation. She wasn't soon going to forget that he'd intended to kill her, but she wasn't going to put comfort ahead of necessity. She was going to need help to get away. Then, too, she liked the feeling of once more having a strong man bend before her will. She'd keep him around until there was something better.

"How about Mexico?" she asked.

"Why not?" he said. "We can pull a few jobs on the way and we ought to be loaded by the time we arrive."

"How long will it take us to get to New York?" she asked.

"Two, three hours. But it would be smarter to stay out of the city right now."

"We have to take the chance," Betty Jane said. Without telling him the amount, she explained about the

money the Syndicate was supposed to be saving for her. "After all," she added demurely, "it's from the business they took away from us so you should be sharing in it too. We'll get the money and then we'll go to Mexico."

"Baby," he said with a look of admiration, "I always said you were smart. Here we go."

"You know where we can reach Tommy Blue Eyes?" she asked.

"I've got the number where he could be reached a year and a half ago. It's probably still good. There ain't no heat on him."

"Okay," she said, settling back against the seat.

By the middle of the afternoon they were in New York City. One of the first things they did was buy a newspaper. The news of Betty Jane's escape wasn't in it.

"They must have discovered it," Eddie said. "It just hasn't hit the papers yet. But there may be an alarm out for you."

Betty Jane stopped in a neighborhood store and bought a hat which would cover most of her blonde hair. She took the further precaution of making up her lips and eyebrows differently, so that a casual glance would not identify her.

Eddie waited in the car while she went into a drugstore and phoned the number he'd given her. There was no answer. She hunted through the phone book until she found the number of George Bolles. She called it.

"Just tell him it's one of his clients," she told the girl who answered.

A moment later Bolles's voice came on the phone.

"This," said Betty Jane, "is the girl to whom you've been sending fifty dollars every week."

There was a moment of silence. "Where are you?" he asked.

"In the city."

"I don't recall," he said carefully, "hearing that there has been any commutation of sentence."

"There has been," she said drily. "I arranged it myself. Where is Tommy Blue Eyes?"

Another silence. "I believe the person you refer to is out of the city on a business trip," he said.

"Maybe you'll do then," she said crisply. "I want my money."

"I beg your pardon?"

"My money," she said fiercely. "You know damn well what I'm talking about. You made the deal. There was supposed to be two thousand dollars a week put away for me. That makes a hundred thousand dollars. I want it."

"You understand," he said, putting out the words as if he were sewing a mine field, "that I cannot speak fully for the client to which you refer. I believe, however, that you could say this is accurate. It was agreed that certain arrangements would be made for you providing you kept your part of the bargain. This included sticking to a story and serving whatever sentence you were given. Under those circumstances, it was worth it. I doubt if it is worth anything if you are free under the circumstances you imply."

"You mean I don't get the money?"

"I cannot give it to you under any circumstances," the lawyer said. "My client is out of town and will be for several weeks. I suggest that you return and then the money will be kept for you as agreed."

"Like hell I will," she snapped. "I want it now or I'm going to make trouble."

"You are hardly in a position to make trouble," he pointed out coldly.

In a sudden fury, she slammed the receiver on the hook and stalked out to the car. For fully five minutes she sat cursing under her breath. Then she told Eddie what the lawyer had said.

"If that's the way the deal was made," Eddie said, "I guess you can't really say they're double-crossing you. It's not like you were a regular part of the mob; maybe they'd cover for you then. I guess I'd better spot a job we can pull."

"Wait a minute," she said. She suppressed her anger until she could think. Then she had an idea. It pleased her for she needed somewhere to vent her anger and this would serve for that too. "I can get us enough money to get to Mexico," she said. "Drive down Park Avenue."

They drove along Park until she told him when to stop. "I'll need fifty bucks," she said. Eddie handed it over and she entered an apartment house.

It was where she and Lance Peru had lived. She found one of the elevator operators who had been there then, and handed him the fifty dollars. "I don't care how you fix it," she said, "but I want to get into my old apartment for three minutes."

"It's easy," he said with a grin. "The people who are living there now are on vacation."

He let her in with a passkey and waited in the doorway. Betty Jane went into the bathroom. She took the top off the water tank of the toilet and fished around inside. She breathed a sigh of relief and came up with a large patch of adhesive tape. Still clinging to the tape was a key. She threw the tape into the toilet and marched out.

"Okay," she said. "You've earned your fifty."

He took her down to the street level and slid open the door. "When did you get out?" he asked curiously.

"Forget that I did," she snapped.

He did forget it, but only after he had checked and found there was no reward for her.

Betty Jane next had Eddie drive to a nearby bank. It lacked only a few minutes to closing time. She hurried inside, still clutching the key she'd taken from the apartment. When she came out a few minutes later she was carrying a large brown envelope.

"Okay," she said to Eddie. "Now drive out to Lotus Park."

"Lotus Park," he said. "Where the hell is that?"

"Long Island. Drive out toward Long Beach. You know where that is, don't you?"

He nodded. "Out in the sticks. What the hell are we going to do out there?"

"Get the money for Mexico," she said. There was a stiff, fixed grin on her face. "Just drive and don't ask so many damn questions." She leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes as he headed for the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge.

When they passed through Oceanside, she sat up and took the hat off, letting the wind blow her blonde hair. Her eyes were bright as she watched the familiar road unwind. She directed him to turn left when they reached Barnum Boulevard.

She added more directions and they soon pulled up in front of the house on Sycamore Lane.

"Wait here," she said. She was out of the car and gone before he could ask any questions.

The front door was unlocked. She opened it and walked inside. Her mother was sitting in the living room. There was music coming from the radio. She looked up as she heard the front door close. For a long minute, mother and daughter stared at each other.

"Hi, Mom," Betty Jane said. She could feel the anger rising again at the sight of her mother's drawn face, but she tried to keep her voice casual. She walked into the room.

"I—I just heard on the radio a minute ago," Cynthia Allen said. Her eyes searched her daughter's face. "It's true then."

"That I walked away?" Betty Jane said. "Sure. I got tired of the way they ran things. It was too much like home."

"You've got to go back," Cynthia said. "I know now, Betty Jane, that your father and I made a lot of mistakes. I'm sorry—if that means anything. But you've got to go back—then maybe when it's all over, we—the three of us—can start all over again."

"Not me, Mom," she said lightly. "I'm going on to bigger and better things. And you're going to help me."

Cynthia Allen shook her head.

"Oh, yes," Betty Jane said sweetly. "I know you've got all those bonds you've been saving for years. Three or four thousand dollars' worth. You're going to endorse all of them and hand them over to me. Then you're going to keep your mouth shut long enough for me to get them cashed."

"No," her mother said.

"Oh, yes, you are, Mother dear," Betty Jane said. She undid the clasp of the large envelope she was carrying. "You remember when Daddy had his heart attack?"

Her mother nodded, her eyes watchful.

"Well, he had it because I called him and told him I knew what he'd been doing the night before," Betty Jane said. "But he didn't know I had pictures taken. Want to see?" She handed over a glossy photograph

showing her father and two men at the night club table with three girls.

Her mother looked at the picture. When she raised her eyes, her face was a little grayer, but that was all.

"That little chick snuggling up to your husband," Betty Jane said, "is a fifteen-year-old girl he hired from me—only he didn't know it was me until the next day. He paid me a hundred dollars for her. Now, are you going to give me the money or should I stay around and talk to Daddy about it?"

"It would kill him," her mother whispered, as if to herself. She looked at her daughter unbelievingly. "God help you, Betty Jane," she said. "I'll give you the bonds. They won't help you, but I'll give them to you." Her hands, as though independent of the rest of her, were methodically tearing the photograph to pieces.

The door bell jangled.

Cynthia Allen's face was a mask, from which all awareness had fled, yet she must have heard the bell. She stood up and walked toward the door, her legs moving like those of an automaton. She opened it and Steve Harper came inside.

"Mrs. Allen," he said, "is Betty Jane here? I thought I saw her driving up the street and I came over—" He stopped short as he caught sight of her. There was a baffled look on his face.

"Hi, Steve," Betty Jane said.

"She's here," Cynthia Allen said as though unaware that he had seen her daughter. "They just announced on the radio that she escaped this morning."

"I thought it was something like that," he said slowly. He looked at Betty Jane. "You're going to give yourself up?"

Betty Jane shook her head. "I just stopped off to get a little traveling money from Mom. Then I'll be on my way."

Steve stared at her steadily and something went out of his face. It left him looking older and in some way she didn't understand widened the distance between them. Then he started speaking and she understood.

"I guess," he said, "I should have seen it a long time ago. But I was blind-crazy in love with you and I kept expecting that you'd change. I should have called the

cops on you that first night in New York when you wanted me to take you to the night club. But because I was a sucker, I helped to make it easy for you to go on. But I won't play it that way any more."

"What the hell are you talking about?" she demanded.

"You and I are through," he said and sounded almost relieved, "so maybe I can help do now what I should have done before. You might still have a chance, if you stop running. You can't do this to yourself; you can't do it to your mother and father. You're going to give yourself up and face the music."

"Go to hell," she said.

He turned to her mother. "You mustn't give her any money, Mrs. Allen. I'm calling the police."

Cynthia Allen avoided his gaze. "I must," she said. "Betty Jane will—will do a terrible thing if I don't. I'll give her the money. It won't make any difference."

The front door banged open and Eddie Hamill was in the room. "What goes on?" he demanded.

"It's okay, Eddie," Betty Jane said. "Get the money, Mom."

"No," Steve Harper said. "You're going back, Betty Jane."

Eddie Hamill looked at him and recognition came into his eyes. "Hey," he said, "it's the jerk who was in the night club with you that night. Better keep your nose clean, kid."

"Get out," Steve said, facing him. "She's going back to finish her sentence. If you want to get out before I call the cops, you'd better hurry."

"Don't you ever learn anything, kid?" Eddie said.

"Yeah, I learned something," Steve said softly. He took a quick step forward and drove his fist into Eddie's face. Eddie went sprawling across the floor. Steve started after him, his eyes alert.

"No," Betty Jane cried. She threw herself against Steve, wrapping her arms around him. "You can't stop us, Steve."

"Let me go, Bett," Steve said, struggling with her.

"Yeah," Eddie Hamill said from the floor, "let him go, honey. He's asking for it."

Betty Jane twisted her head in time to see the glint of metal in Eddie's fist. Then, with a wrench, she hurled

herself away from Steve—against the wall, her arms spread out to steady herself. Her face was white, her breath rasping in the sudden quiet.

At the same moment, Steve Harper saw the gun. His face paled, but he seemed to know that there was only one way to move. He leaped forward even as the gun spoke.

The heavy bullet seemed to stop him in mid-air. He staggered to a halt, both hands suddenly clasping his middle. The bright red spurted out between his fingers.

"Bett," he said, looking as if he were surprised to hear his own voice, "I only wanted—" He coughed, his face twisting with the effort. The coughing made the bright blood spurt harder between his fingers. Then the lines on his face smoothed out, his legs folded beneath him and he slid to the floor. One hand stretched out, palm upward, giving the crimson sign.

There was a wordless noise from Cynthia Allen.

"Come on, honey," Eddie Hamill said, springing to his feet. He looked at the gun with something close to affection, then slipped it back into the holster under his arm. "We got to get out fast."

"The money," she cried.

"To hell with the money," he said. "Look at her. She ain't going to give you any dough."

Betty Jane saw Cynthia Allen had sagged into a chair, barely conscious.

Eddie reached over and slapped her lightly across the cheek. "Snap out of it, honey. We've got to get out of here."

She turned and followed him out to the car. He started it, wheeled around in the street and gunned the motor.

"If there's a call in," he said, "we ain't got much time. We probably ain't got much anyway. I guess we'd better go back the way we come. The other way just takes us out on the tip of Long Island where they could bottle us up like flies. I knew I was a sucker to let you talk me into coming out here."

Betty Jane slumped in the seat in a daze, not answering.

They reached Long Beach Road and Eddie swung the car to the right. From somewhere behind them they heard the sudden wail of a siren.

"Cops," Eddie said bitterly. He pressed the accelerator

to the floor. "Lucky this boat's got some power. I figure if we can just get past that next town, we'll be okay. There's enough ways then to dodge away from the main stem so we can maybe lose the cops. Hold on, baby."

The speedometer needle crept up to ninety, then more slowly to ninety-five where it hung. The motor whined with strain. And the screech of the siren hung behind them. It seemed neither to gain nor to fall back. Eddie began to grin as he sent the car hurtling ahead.

They hit the edge of Oceanside, but Eddie didn't let up on the speed. He threw the big car around other vehicles on the street with what was almost a joyous abandon.

They reached the center of the town where another main street crossed Long Beach Road. A bus was just starting to creep across, but the driver saw the speeding car and stopped. Then just as they hit the intersection, they heard the scream of the siren that was coming from across the island. They had a brief glimpse of the police car heading directly for them, then they were past. Behind them the siren fell silent as the police car took the corner on two wheels, then sounded its cry again no more than a hundred yards behind them.

"Now it's going to be close," Eddie said. His lips were drawn away from his teeth in a funny locked grin.

As though in answer to his words, a sharp popping sound exploded behind them. Betty Jane had no idea what it was until she heard a sharper crack and spider-web lines ran through the glass of the windshield.

"They're shooting at us," she said.

"They're not just making that noise with their mouths," Eddie said. He reached inside his coat and pulled out his gun. He tossed it on the seat between them. "Maybe you can discourage them, baby."

She stared blankly at the gun. "How?" she asked.

"By shooting," he said calmly. "Just shoot through the back window. They've already busted it."

"I—I don't know how," she protested.

"Just point it and pull the trigger," he snapped. "Don't just sit there, flipping your tongue. Get on it."

She picked up the gun, her skin contracting at the touch of the cold metal. She stared at it curiously. This was the gun, she thought, that had killed Steve Harper.

She twisted in the seat, lifting the heavy weapon. She pointed it toward the police car and pulled the trigger.

The explosion sounded loud in the car and she felt the heavy instrument jump in her hands. The smell of powder bit into her nostrils and she sneezed.

She pointed it again, using her left hand to help steady it. Once more she pulled the trigger and felt the gun buck in her hand. This time she sensed the power of it in the way it kicked back against her palm. With the realization came the thrill of using that power herself.

The next time she kept her eyes open, carefully lining up the end of the barrel with the windshield of the pursuing car. She noticed how the bounce of the car kept throwing it off and she waited, trying to make certain that she fired at the right time. Finally she squeezed the trigger.

Almost simultaneously she saw the starring of the glass in the windshield behind them. The police car suddenly began weaving back and forth across the road. She watched in fascination. Once it seemed about to right itself. Then the front wheels struck the curb. The police car darted across the street, glanced off a tree and turned over. The four wheels revolved lazily in the air.

"Got it," Betty Jane cried. Shrill laughter spilled out of her.

"That's my baby," Eddie said.

The remaining siren still keened behind them, but it was far away.

"We'll make it," Eddie said. "Once we really shake these cops, we'll ditch this heap and grab another one. Then we'll cut across to Brooklyn, duck back into Manhattan, switch cars again and we'll be out of town before they know what's going on."

It sounded good, but Eddie was a little premature. As they sped along, they began hearing the wail of new sirens. None of them were close, yet they seemed now to come from every direction.

They were almost to Southern State Parkway when they hit the first road block. They rounded a curve and there in front of them were three police cars parked across the highway. The vehicles were empty, the police hiding behind other cars on either side of the pavement.

"Hold on, baby," Eddie said grimly.

Without slackening speed, he twisted the wheel sharply. The car mounted the sidewalk, sideswiping a bicycle, and careened through a picket fence. The fence exploded in a shower of wood.

Guns were firing all around them. Betty Jane clung to the door handle and watched the whirling landscape.

Eddie twisted the wheel again and the big car skidded across the grass. An empty baby buggy bounced off one fender, sailing through the air to crash on the porch of the house. Betty Jane had a brief glimpse of a terrified face peering from a window. The car shot through the picket fence again, leaped across the sidewalk and swerved into the road on the other side of the block.

"Cops," Eddie Hamill said savagely. "I'll show them. They're not getting me again."

Betty Jane laughed, the sound gushing from her mouth.

They came to the parkway entrance, but Eddie held the car straight ahead, the accelerator still to the floor.

"They'll be expecting us to take the parkway," he said. "We'll fool them. We're going straight through and cut in toward the city later. Once we get off this damn island we'll be okay."

There were no police cars in sight, but they hadn't shaken off the sirens. Every once in a while, they'd hear the shrill whine above their racing motor—sometimes from the rear, sometimes from the sides. There was something ghostly in the way the unseen wailing stayed with them no matter which way they dodged and ran.

The next police car they sighted was one they came up behind. They rounded a curve and there it was directly ahead of them. It was traveling fast but not nearly as fast as they were.

"Roll down your window," Eddie said, "and let them have it as we go by."

Betty Jane lowered her window and lifted the gun. The wind blew her hair and brought a curiously vivid memory of the night she and Johnny Raymond had raced another boy at Point Lookout.

Eddie blasted on the horn and cut around the police car. To Betty Jane it seemed as though the other vehicle slid backward beside them. She had a glimpse of the two faces, startled and strained, staring at her. She knew the driver was trying to do something, but she didn't wait

to see. She pressed the trigger and saw the driver's face vanish behind a bloody smear. The police car slid out of sight and a moment later she heard the crash far behind them.

"What a baby," Eddie crowed. "That'll show the bastards."

The long, roaring ride was becoming a vague dream to her, but she was beginning to catch some of Eddie's wild exhilaration. They were invincible; nothing could stop them or touch them.

They rocked through another small town, scattering people and cars before them. One car didn't move quite fast enough and a fender clattered down the street after them. Then, as they hit the other end of the town, the scream of sirens suddenly became louder. Two police cars lanced in from a side street, hitting the main road only seconds after they had passed. The two cars swung in close behind them.

Once again Betty Jane propped the gun on the back of the seat and pulled the trigger. She kept pulling it until there were only dull clicks, but the two cars were still there. She felt let down as though her magic had deserted her. She knew the police were firing back, but she could hear no sound except the clack of the hammer against shells that were already spent. It took her a minute to realize that her gun was empty.

She turned her head to ask Eddie if there were any more shells.

She heard the noise first, a dull thump that didn't sound like anything she had ever heard. She saw Eddie's head jerk forward and wondered what was wrong with him.

Then she heard another sound, something like a cough deep in his throat. His head flopped back against the seat and she saw the flaring hole in the middle of his forehead and the gray and red fluid running down into his eyes. Then she knew.

She screamed and grabbed for the steering wheel. She got it just as the car lurched and swerved when Eddie's foot fell off the accelerator. She felt Eddie's inert body slump against her; she fought the panic and sickness that were twisting her insides. She wanted to vomit, but there was no time.

The car was losing speed, but it was still doing better

than eighty and other cars seemed suddenly to leap into the road unwinding ahead of her. She clung to the steering wheel, wildly swinging it every time something popped into sight.

There were more shots from behind her, but she didn't hear them. Then they stopped altogether as the police realized the car was slowing.

At last the car was down to what seemed to her like a crawl. Betty Jane's numb arms dropped from the steering wheel and she slumped back against the seat. She wasn't even looking as the car plowed through a pole fence and jerked to a stop on a lawn. She sat there, breathing shallowly and staring straight ahead.

She was still sitting there when the two cops ran up, with drawn guns, and pulled open the door.

"Okay," one of the cops called back to the second police car. "The guy's dead. The girl's all right."

"Get out, Miss," the other cop said.

Betty Jane let him take her arm and pull her from the car. She was tired and everything seemed to blur before her eyes. She walked beside the two policemen back to where the two Nassau County cars were parked. One of the policemen was just finishing talking on the car phone as they came up.

"It's her all right," one of her cops said. "The Allen girl who skipped from the State Farm this morning. I don't know who the guy is, but we'll probably get something from his prints. This was on the seat between them." He held up the gun, holding it by the trigger guard.

"Dead?" asked the policeman in the car.

"Couldn't be deader. One of us got him right through the head."

The policeman in the car nodded. "He ain't the only one. They got the men in Cars 36 and 51. And there's a dead one at the other end too. Car 2 phoned in a few minutes ago. The girl's mother told them that this boy tried to stop the girl. So she held him while this other guy got his gun out. Then she let go and the guy plugged the kid. She didn't know the guy's name either. The kid was from Lotus Park, used to be sweet on her."

"He certainly picked one," the other cop said. He looked down at the blank-faced blonde. "Five guys dead.

Four cops and a kid. Baby, this time they're going to put you away for a long, long time."

Betty Jane heard him without really realizing what he was saying. She felt completely drained, as though there were nothing more inside her. She heard them talking about the dead. She'd been surprised to hear one of them mention her mother. It seemed to her that her mother and father were dead too. Maybe that was why they'd mentioned her. Lance Peru was dead. Steve Harper was dead. Eddie Hamill was dead. Suddenly there wasn't anybody left to hate and she felt tired.

"A long, long time, baby," the cop repeated. "Get in."

Then some sense of what he was saying penetrated and she felt fear again, stirring weakly inside. But she thought it would be all right. "It'll be all right," she said, putting it into words so that it would be real. "Steve will come to see—" She stopped and remembered that Steve was dead too. She called the roll once again in her mind. Lance Peru. Steve Harper. Eddie Hamill. Her mother and father . . .

She climbed into the car and sat between the two policemen. The feeling of weariness and utter fatigue was like a giant hand pressing down upon her. She looked out the window and the world outside seemed like a hostile wall. She felt shut out and completely alone. And quickly her mind ran on ahead and she saw a great and arid span of years stretching before her. Empty, lonely and frightening years.

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THE 3 FACES OF JANE

Betty Jane Allen was a high-school girl who scandalized her home town...

Betty Hamill was a hoodlum's girl, looking for a quick dollar and a new kick...

Mrs. Chalice was a "business woman," and her phone number was for men only...

They were all the same girl...a girl who knew all the answers, and couldn't tell easy street from the road to nowhere.

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